

I Say I Don't Know (When I Know Well Enough) by intouchwithhumanity

Category: IT (Movies - Muschietti), IT - Stephen King

Genre: Aged-Up Character(s), Angst, Beverly Marsh & Richie Tozier Are Best Friends, Bill Denbrough & Eddie Kaspbrak Are Best Friends, Bisexual Richie Tozier, Eddie Kaspbrak Loves Richie Tozier, Eddie Kaspbrak is Bad at Feelings, Eddie Kaspbrak is a Mess, Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier-centric, Eventual Smut, First Kiss, Fluff, Gay Eddie Kaspbrak, Good Parents Maggie & Wentworth Tozier, High School, Homophobia, Internalized Homophobia, M/M, Mike Hanlon Isn't Homeschooled, Minor Bill Denbrough/Beverly Marsh, Musician Richie Tozier, Musicians, Oblivious Eddie Kaspbrak, Period-Typical Homophobia, Reddie, Reddie Fluff, Richie Tozier Being an Asshole, Richie Tozier Flirts, Richie Tozier Loves Eddie Kaspbrak, Richie Tozier is a Little Shit, Sassy Stanley Uris, Secret Relationship, Slow Build, Slow Burn, Soft Eddie Kaspbrak, Soft Richie Tozier, Sonia Kaspbrak's A+ Parenting, none of them leave derry, reddie angst, reddie smut, richie tozier plays guitar

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Summary:

‘Where’s Richie?’ Eddie asked.

Ben said, ‘He’s probably down the music block again.’

‘Whoever decided to give Richie Tozier a guitar was an evil man,’

Stan chuckled. 'He's loud enough as it is.'

Latter half of high school, Richie gets a guitar and Eddie absolutely hates it. That is, until the day he catches Richie singing a love song which he's written about one of his best friends.

Concept sounds kinda cheesy maybe, but this is actually pretty angsty and involves a lot of Eddie being a mess and discovering his sexuality, and Richie being soft as hell and trying not to get his heart broken. They're both shit at talking about how they feel and fuck up a lot, and there's music.

1. Glasses

Author's Note:

Yeah so I had this headcanon of Eddie hearing a song that Richie wrote about him and then I wrote the song and the fic just kind of spilled out from there and I'm really enjoying it - written a few chapters already !

'Where's Richie?' Eddie asked, swinging his legs over the cafeteria bench to sit beside the other Losers.

Ben waited until he was done with his mouthful, then said, 'He's probably down the music block again.'

'Whoever decided to give Richie Tozier a guitar was an evil man,' Stan chuckled, picking at his food. 'He's loud enough as it is.'

Bev nudged him, her fingers twitching for another cigarette. 'I think it's nice how obsessed he is with it. You know how he's always had trouble focusing on one thing at a time.'

Stan did know, and so did everybody else. Richie's energy was almost permanently on overdrive, which kept his mouth running faster than his feet and his attention diverting by even the smallest distraction.

Everyone had expected the guitar to go the same way as every other novelty birthday present he'd received over the years, but to their surprise, Richie had kept up with his daily practice and lessons, often taking additional time out of his lunch period, evenings and weekends to play.

He took the instrument with him nearly everywhere he went, would often regale the Losers with new strumming patterns and chord progressions which he had memorised, and would learn to play their favourite songs to sing along. Richie would never sing for them himself though, as he insisted that he couldn't play and sing at the same time. No one had really questioned whether this was true.

'I'm sure he could take one lunch break,' Eddie grumbled. 'He hasn't eaten with us all week.'

'It's n-not like we don't s-see him anymore,' Bill reminded.

Eddie knew that this was true, but ever since he was eight years old, he'd shared his lunch breaks with Richie. As much as he hated to admit it, Eddie was a stickler for routine. It was comforting, and Richie had always been part of that routine.

The guitar had thrown everything off course. Richie was consumed by it in a way which always made Eddie resent it. He saw it as an addiction, like the cigarettes stuffed in Richie's shirt pockets, or the inhaler that he still hid in his locker, despite knowing it was a placebo.

'I'm gonna go find him,' Eddie said, picking up the uneaten half of his sandwich for the walk. 'One of you can have my pudding.'

'Dibs,' Mike said, hauling the plate onto his tray.

Eddie finished his sandwich, stopping briefly to rinse his hands in the music block toilets. As he turned off the tap, the muffled sounds of Richie's guitar percolated through the walls. He started to follow the sound, traipsing down the hall until he reached the furthest room. He was about to burst in, hand poised on the doorknob, when Richie opened his mouth and started to sing.

It's not often at just thirteen years

You're forced to face your darkest fears

I never knew someone so brave as you.

Eddie took his hand off the doorknob. It wasn't a song that he'd heard before. It certainly wasn't a voice that he'd heard before, lilting

and husky.

And when you're choking raggedly

I find it's me that cannot breathe

And all that's red inside me drains to blue.

Something tugged in his heart as his throat dried and constricted, and Eddie wished that he had his inhaler. He raised his hand to knock on the door, to stop himself from eavesdropping on Richie singing, but he couldn't bring himself to do so.

And through my coke-bottle glasses

I've seen and missed a thousand chances

And still I find

That it's you that's fucking blind

Eddie furrowed his brow as he realised that this wasn't a song that Richie had found. After all, Richie had often reiterated that Buddy Holly was his hero for being a celebrity musician who wore the same coke-bottle glasses that he did. Eddie knew that this was not a Buddy Holly song.

You catch me stealing glances

You're always expecting answers

You look at me and ask what's up

And I say I don't know, when I know

Well enough.

This was a song that Richie had written for himself, a song he had composed chords and melody and lyrics to. Eddie wondered how he could possibly have done something that impressive without mentioning it sixty times. All he did these days was talk about the guitar and the progress he was making. He'd never even implied that

he had tried writing his own music.

I carved your name once next to mine

So we're preserved there for all time

If only we had shared the kiss it promises.

It was a good voice. Eddie understood not wanting to share a voice, though, since he too was an admirable singer but would never admit such a thing to the other Losers. Whenever he sang along to Richie's guitar, it was in non-committed hums and half-spoken phrases.

I've memorised the valleys of your face

Could sing the notes in how you say my name

I've come to accept that it's just what it is.

Only after these lines did Eddie start to ponder Richie's inspiration. He used to make up stories all the time, rambling and nonsensical, with too many characters and plotlines which didn't go anywhere. He was never short of an imagination. He obviously told jokes, which were usually short and quipping, and followed similar formats time and again. That made structuring a song simple, he supposed.

And through my coke-bottle glasses

I've seen and missed a thousand chances

And still I find

That it's you that's fucking blind.

It was catchy. Now that the chorus had rolled around again, Eddie found himself leaning against the wall beside the closed door, smiling to himself and nodding gently in rhythm, even tapping his fingers idly on the fabric of his shorts.

You catch me stealing glances

You're always expecting answers

You look at me and ask what's up

And I say I don't know, when I know

Well enough.

Eddie couldn't help but wonder if maybe, just maybe, Richie had written the song with a specific person in mind, someone that he had developed feelings for, by the sounds of it. It was only a thin possibility, as far as Eddie was concerned, since Richie told him everything and would certainly have mentioned if he was crushing on someone. At least, Eddie thought so, hoped so. Eddie would tell Richie that kind of thing.

We just keep on getting older

And as the Derry air gets colder

I'll wrap my arm around your shoulder

The only way I get to hold ya.

There was something pained in Richie's voice now which Eddie hadn't noticed before. The same kind of twang that he'd heard a few times before, usually when Richie was scared. He hadn't seen Richie all that scared since they were young, since they'd faced It that gloomy summer.

It's only you that I'm afraid for

There's no one that I wouldn't trade for

If you wondered what I stayed for

It's the same thing each night I've prayed for.

There was suddenly no doubt in Eddie's mind that Richie meant each word that fired from his lips. His stomach twisted as he felt jealous, guilty and betrayed that Richie had withheld this secret from him. Even more, he hated the idea that somebody else out there might know who this song was about, when Eddie didn't.

*And I'm not foolish enough
To believe that there could be an us
But I swear I never thought I'd love
Anybody like I love you.*

Love. Richie was in love. Unrequited love, he seemed to believe, but love nonetheless. Eddie had never even thought of Richie as being the type to fall in love. Love was such a serious thing, and serious was the last thing that Richie ever wanted to be. That explained a little more why he hadn't said anything. A crush was one thing, love was something else. Still, Eddie expected to be privy to that information, since love didn't happen overnight.

*And I know I'm so lucky to call
You my best friend at all
So I am sorry that I fall
A little more each day for you.*

Eddie's heart stopped. Best friend. Richie said best friend. Eddie didn't know who the song was about, but he knew that Richie only had six best friends. Six Losers, only one of whom was a girl.

*And through my coke-bottle glasses
I've seen and missed a thousand chances
And still I find
That it's you that's fucking blind*

Still, Beverly and Bill had been together for years. A crush on Beverly would be extremely inappropriate and, Eddie realised sadly, would make complete sense. Richie and Bev were close friends, had a lot in common, spent a lot of time alone together when they were smoking. Eddie felt nauseous.

I can't live through stolen glances

But if I asked I know the answer

You're the only way to shut me up

Bev. Eddie sighed. First Bill and Ben, and now Richie. Next thing he knew Stan and Mike would be fawning over her too. He felt guilty even thinking this way. Beverly was one of his closest friends, and she hadn't done anything wrong. It wasn't her fault that boys fell in love with her, that Richie had fallen in love with her.

Because I will never tell you

I'm in love.

Eddie was sad and he didn't know why. Something blue and muddled boiled in his stomach and flooded through his system, sullyng him. Silence fell as the last chord rang out into the nothing, clouding over Eddie with its heavy echo. The unfamiliar feeling inside him morphed to frustrated anger, surging red.

To escape it, Eddie went back to the bathroom to wash his hands again. Cleaning something always made him feel better, more relaxed. As he rinsed, the door opened, and Richie yelped, 'Fuck, Eddie!' when he saw him standing there.

His eyes wide and frenzied, he took a step back to steady himself, weighted by the guitar slung over his back. 'Shit,' he muttered as he stumbled, gaze darting around the dimly lit tiles and porcelain, clawing a hand through his mop of curled, dark hair. 'What are you doing here?'

Eddie wasn't sure anymore. 'Just haven't seen you much this week,' Eddie murmured, shrugging. 'Thought I'd come and find you.' He was desperate to ask about the song but didn't.

'You been missing me, Eds?' he teased, and a flash of the usual Richie settled back into him, like a pigeon flattening its ruffled feathers.

Rolling his eyes, Eddie said, 'Fuck off,' which was the only way he knew how to say yes without stroking Richie's ego or making things

awkward.

Richie scratched the back of his neck until the skin raised pink. 'Well,' he coughed, 'you could come over tonight if you want? Give you a whole evening.' He winked, 'Since I've been depriving you.'

Eddie mused, 'Seems fair.'

Licking his lower lip, Richie looked Eddie up and down. 'Are you alright?'

'Yeah, why?' Eddie squeaked.

Richie leaned over and twisted off the faucet. 'Think they're clean, buddy.'

Flicking the excess water off his hands, vaguely embarrassed, Eddie said, 'Right.' He yanked a couple of paper towels from the dispenser quickly and dried himself off.

Richie knew Eddie well enough to know that he only washed his hands so compulsively when he was thinking, or rather overthinking, something. So he checked, 'You sure you're okay?'

'Yeah,' Eddie said, squeezing past him to get out of the bathroom.

'Eds?' Richie queried, a line of worry slicing between his eyebrows as he followed Eddie into the hallway.

Hovering at the entrance of the music block, Eddie felt Richie's eyes burning into the back of his head. So he assured, 'I'll meet you after last period, okay?'

Richie nodded, 'Okay.'

Eddie opened the door to the outside world. The cold air swept over his shoulders. He knew he shouldn't say anything, knew he should wait or perhaps not mention it at all, but he looked back over his shoulder and said, 'I didn't know you could sing.'

In the periphery of his vision, he saw Richie's jaw drop open, but Eddie closed the door on it, and slipped away.

Eddie lingered by the rack, eyeing Richie's unclaimed bike. He'd been waiting a good twenty minutes after school and Richie was still yet to appear. He knew that he must have pushed his luck earlier with his comment, because he hadn't spotted Richie around school all afternoon; not at his locker, not in the hallway or the bathroom.

So Eddie knew that Richie may well be avoiding him, wanting to renege on his offer to spend the evening with him. As long as Richie's bike was still there, Eddie expected him to appear. He wouldn't walk all that way. He wouldn't leave his bike prey to the thieves and vandals that still liked to mess with them.

After another ten minutes, Richie finally appeared. 'Fucking hell,' he muttered as he saw that Eddie was still there and waiting.

'Hey,' Eddie greeted feebly.

'Hi.' He didn't move. His eyes flashed to his bike and back again. He'd have to go past Eddie to get to it.

'What took you?' Eddie asked, raising one of his eyebrows, and when Richie didn't say anything, he lowered it and said, 'I'm sorry.'

'What for?'

Eddie thought. 'Eavesdropping. I shouldn't have.'

Richie narrowed his eyes, 'Okay.'

'I didn't mean to,' Eddie said quickly. 'I just hadn't heard you really sing before and I didn't want to interrupt you and well, you can *sing*.'

Blushing, Richie scooted past him and unlocked his bike with fumbling hands. 'Thanks,' he said quietly.

Anxiously, Eddie asked, 'Am I still coming over tonight?'

Richie's face contorted, 'You still want to?'

'Well, yeah,' Eddie scoffed. 'Course I do. Why do you think I stuck around so long?'

'I don't know,' Richie said carefully, cycling slowly towards the road.

Eddie hoped that he would be able to dispel some of Richie's awkwardness when they got back to his house. It was something that Richie hadn't repealed his invitation, but Eddie still felt that he hadn't received Richie's forgiveness for listening in.

Or perhaps he was concerned that Eddie had heard the content of the song and had figured out the truth behind it, which Eddie wanted to hear from the horse's mouth, if he could elicit it. He needed both: to be in Richie's good books and to be his confidante. He hoped that he could have both.

As the Tozier house loomed into view, Richie and Eddie slowed, freewheeling up the driveway. Their wheels clacked in near synchronisation. Eddie was hyperaware of the silence which hung between them, since it was so unusual.

They wandered inside, offering greetings to the Tozier parents slumped on their sofa, then made their way upstairs to Richie's bedroom. It had changed along with the guitar. There were new posters on the walls, there was a guitar stand permanently erected in the corner of the room, and a music stand stacked with books.

There were plectrums on almost every surface. Sheet music was scattered, disorganised on the floor. Eddie itched to order them. He wondered whether any of Richie's own music was amidst the pile.

Richie took the guitar case off his back and meticulously replaced it into the stand, adjusting the strap and absentmindedly picking the strings to see if it was still in tune. Then he delved into the pocket on the front of the case and pulled out a book, well-thumbed, with torn pages and graffitied cover. He clenched it, thinking about the song which Eddie had heard.

'How much did you hear earlier?' Richie asked suddenly.

‘Just one song,’ Eddie said, his heartbeat quickening.

Richie eyed him suspiciously. ‘The whole song?’

Eddie sat on Richie’s bed, folding his legs underneath himself. ‘Yeah.’ When Richie was still quiet, Eddie felt that he had to fill the space. ‘It was good. Catchy.’ He started to hum the chorus.

‘Stop,’ Richie said, almost begging.

‘Sorry.’ Eddie’s throat tightened again, and his fingers reached his waistline, as though there would still be a fanny-pack strapped there, only there wasn’t. He was nervous, more nervous than he had been in a long time, confused and almost frightened at the version of Richie which was currently presenting itself.

Richie frowned, something not making sense to him. ‘You heard the lyrics?’

Eddie considered lying, but he was too curious. His voice cracked like he was still pre-pubescent. ‘Yeah. They’re good. I liked the bridge.’

‘You found that too?’ Richie spluttered.

‘What?’ Eddie asked. ‘I mean the bridge of the song.’

Richie balked, ‘Oh.’ He slotted the book onto his shelf, then started patting at the back pockets of his jeans.

‘Rich?’

He swallowed. ‘Yeah?’

‘You can talk to me, you know,’ Eddie said, picking at the duvet as though it were a plain of grass. Richie just stared at him with that same perplexed look on his face, so he went on, ‘If you need someone to talk to about it, that is. You might already have talked to someone else,’ he said, shrugging, to try and dispel his premature envy.

Richie strained, ‘I haven’t. I haven’t talked to anyone about it.’

Eddie tried not to show his relief. ‘Why not?’

‘Well, I mean it’s,’ Richie blinked, ‘not exactly fucking easy.’

He nodded, ‘Yeah, I guess not.’

‘You guess not?’ Richie repeated incredulously.

Deciding to take a shot, Eddie shifted, ‘Well, yeah. She’s one of your best friends and she’s dating another one of your best friends.’

Richie’s eyes widened then slowly rolled. His eyelids hooded as he stooped to place the flat of his palms on the window sill. A disbelieving smile spread across his face and he huffed, ‘You think it’s about Bev.’

‘Yeah,’ Eddie said quickly, then his heart hardened as he toyed with the possibility that he had been wrong. ‘Are you saying that it isn’t?’

Eddie’s mind raced as he realised that if he was wrong about Bev, but Richie had still declared the subject of his song to be a best friend, then that meant there were five possible candidates for Richie’s affection, and they were all boys.

‘Oh, fuck,’ Eddie said, wiping the sweat from his palms on his thighs.

‘There it is,’ Richie sighed. ‘Penny’s dropped, has it?’

Reeling, Eddie climbed off the bed and paced, wringing his hands together. He had more questions rattling around his head than he could clutch hold of, like salmon jumping upstream and slipping through his fingers, like balloons rising up into the sky just out of his reach.

‘So,’ Eddie gulped, coming to a halt beside Richie at the window, not looking at him. ‘It’s not about Bev,’ was all he managed to say.

‘No,’ Richie affirmed, dropping his chin to his chest.

Eddie ran the lines of the chorus through in his head again. ‘Is it about Stan?’ he asked weakly.

‘Oh fucking sweet Jesus,’ Richie gasped, exasperated, standing up straight and turning to face him. ‘You are such a fucking idiot.’

'I'm doing my fucking best here,' Eddie snapped, but the tears were starting to sting in his eyes, as the doubts prickled in the back of his mind, creeping forwards like cockroaches in the dark of a sewer grate.

Frustrated, Richie reached for the book on his shelf, letting it fall open to the break in its spine, and slapped it down on the sill in front of Eddie. 'Do better.'

Eddie read and re-read the lyrics on the page, peering through the scratches of crossed-out words and lines, at the notes made in the margins, at the chord names inked in red to stand out above the chosen stanzas.

He turned around with the book in his hand, searching for its author's eyes to confirm the truth that screamed out from the pages. 'Richie,' he said quietly.

Richie met his gaze, and Eddie could see that there were tears in his eyes too. 'What?'

'I am a fucking idiot,' Eddie whispered.

Rubbing his temple, Richie sighed, 'No, you're not. I'm the fucking idiot.'

Almost inaudibly, Eddie said, 'You're in love with me.'

'It's fucked up, I know,' Richie said, then closed his eyes. 'So please spare me the platitudes or the slurs or whatever it is you feel you need to say, because I really don't think I can hear it. You can just go and I guess we'll figure out which one of us gets custody of which Losers later.'

Eddie didn't have anything to say. He was in shock. But he didn't want to go, and his heart ached horribly as he considered what Richie was feeling, how confused and alone and desperate. So he did the only thing he could think of to do, which was to drop the book, approach his friend slowly, quietly, and hold him.

Reopening his eyes with surprise, Richie almost pushed Eddie away, so unprepared for the physical contact, the warmth. As Eddie's

squeeze tightened, drawing him closer, Richie let his arms drape over Eddie's shoulders. 'I'm sorry,' he said, his breath skating past Eddie's ear.

'Don't be,' Eddie said, shuddering.

'But I am,' he insisted. 'It's fucking awful.'

Eddie's knees buckled. 'It's not awful.' He spread his hands up Richie's back, feeling the heat of his skin through the cotton of his shirt.

'It is,' Richie sniffed, not knowing how to respond to Eddie's kindness, his softness, when he had expected to never be touched by him again. 'It's so fucked. I'm so fucked.'

Pulling his head back far enough that he could see Richie's in front of his again, Eddie clamped his hands on Richie's face to stop it from dipping with shame. He hated to feel the moistness on Richie's cheeks as the tears continued to spill, hated to see the devastated defeat in his cobalt eyes.

'It's okay, Rich,' Eddie tried.

'Do you hate me?' he asked quietly.

Eddie's heart froze into glass and shattered. He pulled Richie's face nearer to his, so that their eyes were aligned, so Richie could see his sincerity. 'Fuck no. No! Richie, I could never hate you. That's fucking ridiculous. I – I –' he stopped, as the tip of his nose grazed against Richie's.

Richie inhaled sharply as he couldn't help but notice that Eddie's lips were closer than they had ever been to his before and couldn't obstruct the invasive thought which flashed across his mind, that he only had to lean forwards another inch or so to close the gap between them and steal one of his wildest dreams into a reality.

Eddie felt Richie's hands ball into fists and relax again, sliding to rest on each of Eddie's shoulders. He saw the tautness appear and disappear in his jaw. He knew what Richie was thinking, unequivocally, but he didn't move away.

He wasn't sure why he didn't, whether he was testing his own bravery or Richie's, or if some feral curiosity wanted to take advantage of the situation, but he stayed there and gently swiped his thumbs through the tear tracks on Richie's cheeks, allowing his eyes to flicker between Richie's, his lips to part.

When Richie kissed him, Eddie's eyes fluttered closed for just a moment, before he pushed him away, releasing their hold on each other, putting the distance back between them. Richie felt hollowed.

Eddie stared at him, one limb still protectively extended, quite literally keeping Richie at arm's length. 'I have to go now,' he said quickly, and tried to get around him.

'Fuck,' Richie sighed, stumbling backwards, putting himself between Eddie and the door. 'Fuck, I'm sorry, Eds, I'm sorry. Don't go.'

'Don't call me Eds,' Eddie pleaded, trying to reach for the door handle to the right of Richie's hip.

Richie clamped his own hand on it. 'Wait, wait. I'm sorry. Thought that you,' he sighed, fighting to meet Eddie's gaze. 'I crossed a line. There was a line. I crossed it. Should have guessed that you would just be nice to me because you're you and you're always fucking nice to me.'

'No, I'm not,' Eddie retorted. 'I'm a jerk to you.' He meant it. Staying in that embrace might have been the worst position he could put Richie in, and he felt guilty as he listened to Richie's rambling apologies, because he didn't think it was his fault.

'Can we forget that I did that?' Richie asked.

'No,' Eddie whispered honestly.

'Please?' he begged, so desperate not to lose Eddie now. 'I misread.'

Eddie swallowed, realising painfully that Richie didn't misread at all. He'd waited for the kiss, daring him, wanting him to. That didn't make any sense. He wasn't supposed to think about Richie like that, to wonder what it would be like to kiss him, to let their lips touch.

‘Eddie?’ Richie stammered. ‘Have I fucked it?’

‘I don’t know.’

Richie removed the glasses from his face, carelessly throwing them to the floor so that he could rub his eyes with the calloused balls of his fingertips. ‘Fuck. I really am sorry.’ He dropped his hands. ‘I never would have done anything about it. I was never going to say anything.’

Eddie stared at him, at his gangly limbs and unruly hair, the patterned shirts and shoes with no socks. He stared at his clouded eyes and the freckles peppered across his cheeks, at his thick eyebrows and angular nose, his square jaw and his red, red lips. He looked at the glasses on the floor.

And through my coke-bottle glasses

I’ve seen and missed a thousand chances.

Panicking, Richie started to stream, ‘You weren’t supposed to hear it but then you did and I just was fucking frustrated because you still couldn’t tell how I fucking feel and I always think I’m being so fucking obvious and then you were here and you weren’t cursing me out about it or yelling at me or even just being freaked out or disgusted which was what I expected and I know I shouldn’t have expected those things because we are friends and you wouldn’t do that to me and then you were right there and fuck, I just got a little lost in it all and –’

‘Beep-beep, Richie,’ Eddie snapped suddenly, his hands trembling.

Richie felt like he’d swallowed his tongue. It had been years since somebody had beeped him to be quiet. It made him feel like he was thirteen years old again, careering along the kissing bridge with his friends, playing at the quarry or in their old hideout, smashing the buttons on a game of Street Fighter. With Eddie. Always with Eddie.

‘Let me,’ Eddie breathed, stepping closer to him, one arm reaching outwards.

Richie’s hand tightened on the door handle, believing that to be

Eddie's target, but he flinched when he felt Eddie's hand push against his hip.

'Eddie?'

'Just shut the fuck up, okay?' Eddie said quietly, bringing his other hand to mirror the first.

Richie's heart strummed as, through his blurred vision, he watched Eddie's feet slot between his own, watched the air between them narrow, watched Eddie's face tilt slightly upwards towards his. Uncertain, since he felt he had jeopardised everything that he had ever shared with Eddie by kissing him before, he didn't dare press their lips together. Yet, like a magnetic pull, he found his chin tilting downwards, leaning ever so slightly closer.

If Eddie had ever felt fear before, then the memories paled against how he felt as he closed his eyes and pressed his lips to Richie's of his own volition. It consumed and exhumed him until he no longer knew where he was or whether his feet met the ground, and he could sense the corpuscles under his skin quivering like gooseflesh in the cold.

His eyelids squeezed underneath a furrowed brow, almost as though he were in pain, but he pushed his body up against Richie's with such fervour that Richie was pinned against the door. When he started to pull away, only to snatch a breath, his half-closed eyes saw Richie chase after the kiss, drawing his hands to Eddie's neck to pull him back. His heart spasmed.

Richie whimpered as his lips parted enough to allow Eddie's tongue to slip into his mouth. He felt like his mind was quiet for the first time in his life, as he let sweet, dangerous joy trickle through him. He'd never felt so completely snug inside his skin as he did then, with his hands cupping the curve of Eddie's collar, his knee hitching between Eddie's thighs.

They slowed; they stopped. Their lips broke apart and hovered a hair's breadth away, so that when Eddie opened his eyes, Richie's face was so close that it split into a hazy Venn diagram, blending him together in the wrong places.

Richie wished that he was still wearing his glasses when Eddie stepped back and his face unfocused. He bit his lip, hard.

‘You’re trying not to talk, aren’t you?’ Eddie said quietly, and Richie nodded. Not knowing what else to do, Eddie bent down to the floor and picked up Richie’s glasses to hand back to him. Their fingers brushed together, static, as Eddie placed them in Richie’s unsteady grip.

His vision restored, Richie felt like the dream settled solidly into reality, and he stopped feeling the free delirium, replaced with a hard knot of unknowns. Eddie’s face was unreadable to him: flushed cheeks, lips smacked together, eyes slightly too wide, eyebrows steeped.

Eventually, Eddie broke the silence again. ‘I think I should go.’

‘What?’ Richie spluttered.

‘I should go,’ Eddie said again, more resolutely, stepping to reach for the freed handle, but Richie still stood in front of the door. Without looking at him, Eddie asked, ‘You gonna let me out now?’

Richie hesitated, then stepped aside. His heart dangled precariously in his throat as he watched Eddie leave and close the door behind him. He didn’t realise that he had been holding his breath until he exhaled heavily.

He scratched the crook of his arm as he wandered to the book splayed on the floor, still open at the song which he had written and unwittingly played for Eddie. He picked it up and put it back on the shelf, wondering which lyrics would have to be altered following that evening’s events. His brain boggled; confused, fascinated, and for the first time, hopeful.

Eddie watched him putting the book away from the driveway below, then mounted his bike and cycled home.

2. Problem

Summary for the Chapter:

Eddie has shut himself away after kissing Richie, so Richie goes to find him.

Sat in the shower, Eddie still didn't feel clean. The water beat down on his hunched spine as he hugged his knees. After a while, Sonia Kaspbrak rapped her fat knuckles on the bathroom door, hollering at Eddie to check that he hadn't slipped and cracked his head open on the porcelain. Eddie almost felt like he had; like his brain was oozing out of his skull in red and blue.

The whole weekend, he'd made his excuses to the other Losers, claiming that he was snowed under with school work, and had let his mother pamper him with her unnecessary affections. He couldn't see him. He couldn't see any of them, not if Richie might be there too. And Richie had a funny habit of just turning up uninvited.

As Eddie towel dried his hair, he heard the doorbell ring downstairs.

'Hey, Mrs K. Eddie home?'

Eddie's heart froze. 'No, no, no,' he muttered, hoping that just maybe his mother would be in one of her moods where she didn't want Eddie to have company.

'He's upstairs,' Sonia said truthfully. 'But it is a Sunday night, Richie. You have school tomorrow.'

Richie promised, 'That's why I'm here. I need Eddie's help with a math problem. Something's just not adding up.'

'Oh, you fucking dick,' Eddie mumbled to himself, draping the towel around his neck.

'Well, alright, but don't be too late, okay?' Sonia insisted.

'We won't,' Richie agreed and bounded noisily up the stairs.

‘Shit!’ Eddie cursed, rummaging quickly for his pyjama bottoms under his pillow and stumbling to stick his feet through them. As Richie burst through the door, he doubled over, only just having pulled the waistband up in time. ‘Fucking Christ! You should knock!’

Richie flushed, trying to keep his eyes trained on Eddie’s furious face, with its ruffled, damp hair and pink cheeks and crinkled nose, and not the bare skin of his arms and chest and shoulders. ‘Whoops,’ he said, closing the door behind him. ‘That could have been really awkward.’

‘You think?’ Eddie said sarcastically, going to his drawer to find a spare t-shirt to wear.

Slightly disappointed to watch Eddie put more clothes on, Richie swanned over to the bed and sat himself down as though it were his own. ‘Can we talk?’

Eddie folded his arms. ‘Math problem?’

‘Come on, I thought that was pretty good,’ Richie laughed, trying to lighten the mood.

Sighing, Eddie admitted, ‘Rich, I’m not ready to talk about it just yet, okay?’

His nose twitched. ‘I think we need to, though. Unfortunately, you’re the only one I can talk to about this. Unless you’ve told anyone, that is.’

‘I haven’t,’ Eddie said. He hadn’t seen anyone, let alone told anyone. ‘So, you haven’t told anyone?’

‘No,’ Richie said, laying down on his side, propped up on his elbow. ‘Wouldn’t without your permission.’

‘You don’t have it.’

Richie frowned. ‘Duly noted. Then I guess we’re stuck with each other.’

Eddie’s toes curled, pawing at the carpet. ‘Fuck.’

Cocking an eyebrow, Richie asked, 'Are you going to sit down?'

Squeezing himself into the gap at the head of the bed, Eddie tried to look as nonchalant as Richie did, but he failed. He was confused at Richie's laxness, since the last time they had seen each other, Richie had been so fragile, so quiet and so scared, and now he seemed back to his usual upbeat, boisterous persona. It was quite a shift.

'How are you being so,' Eddie grimaced, 'normal?'

Richie sighed. 'I guess I've had a lot of practice. Being normal around you, I mean.'

Considering this made Eddie reel. So many past interactions cycled through his head: jokes that they had made, secrets that they had swapped, games that they had played. He wondered for how long Richie had suppressed the butterflies swarming in his stomach, the hitch in his breath, the mistiness in his eyes.

'Right,' Eddie said, trilling his lips. 'Still, I thought you'd be, I don't know,' he trailed off, unsure what he really had expected from Richie in their time apart. The same panicked nausea which had plagued him, he supposed. The same downward spiral of questions looping like a horde of bats in the recesses of his conscious and subconscious minds. The same fear.

Absentmindedly, Richie cracked his knuckles as he spoke. 'I'll be honest with you, Eds.'

'Don't call me Eds,' Eddie said automatically, his face screwing up. 'And stop cracking your knuckles, you know it makes my teeth hurt.' He shuddered. 'Like nails on a fucking chalkboard.'

Richie held his palms up in surrender. He saw Eddie's eyes slice across the scar on his hand. 'Sorry.'

'You'll thank me when you don't get arthritis.'

Unable to stop himself from smiling, Richie tried again, 'I'll be honest with you, *Eddie*,' and when he caught Eddie's gaze, he continued, 'all my cards are on the fucking table.'

Eddie felt like he could see them, but he didn't know whether the odds were in Richie's favour, if those cards were really worth something, or if he was a fool leaping all in. They weren't exactly cards that he expected to turn up.

When it came to his own hand, he was playing blind, cards still face down on the felt, and he didn't know which ones his chips were. Then he found himself wondering if they were betting against each other or playing on the same team.

'How does that make it easier to be normal?' Eddie quizzed.

'I've already gambled everything I've got,' Richie said, laughing to try and cover the ache in his chest. 'I went for it. Might as well accept that if I've lost, I've lost, and drink champagne until the round ends.' He smiled sadly. 'This might be as good as it gets. The few moments before you tell me to fuck off out of your life forever.'

The sentiment made Eddie quiver, and he cursed himself for it, hoping that Richie didn't notice or that if he did, he attributed it to a shiver from his hair still drying. He eyed Richie. 'I wouldn't ever say that to you. I'd never want you to fuck off forever.'

'No?'

'Fuck off, maybe,' Eddie admitted, 'because you're an asshole and very annoying. But not forever.'

As long as that remained true, then Richie felt he had everything to hope for and nothing to lose. 'So, we're okay then?'

Eddie hesitated, 'We're still friends, if that's what you mean.'

Richie shuffled awkwardly. 'So it doesn't matter that I'm, you know,' he struggled, searching for the right word. None of them felt right at this point. He settled on, 'different?'

In all honesty, thinking too much about it made Eddie very uncomfortable. He'd always been taught that there was a right way to be in a relationship and a wrong way, and whatever Richie was feeling firmly fell into the latter category.

On the other hand, he knew that Richie was just about his favourite person in the world and he hadn't actually changed over the last few days, so it didn't make sense to Eddie to suddenly not want him as a friend anymore, not like him anymore.

'No,' Eddie said, trying to sound flippant.

He also knew what it was like to hate yourself for the way you were; he thought it every time he looked at the inhaler in his locker, every time he washed his hands. He couldn't bear to think that Richie might feel that way, judging himself.

'You're still you,' Eddie said. 'Couldn't call myself a Loser if I had a problem with you being different in some way. That's kind of our thing.'

Richie's lips twisted. 'Thanks.'

'So you think you are,' Eddie tried to search for the same word which had eluded Richie, 'different? In general, I mean. It's not just,' he squeaked, 'me that makes you think so?'

Slowly, Richie nodded. 'I mean, it started with you, and then that got me thinking about it. If you weren't in the picture, maybe I wouldn't have figured it out.'

Eddie tried to absorb this. 'Okay.'

'What about you?' Richie asked, noticing how Eddie visibly tensed at the question. 'Have you ever thought that you're -?'

'No,' Eddie cut him off.

Richie didn't seem all that disappointed. 'Alright. Good to know.'

The reason he didn't seem disappointed was that he wasn't. After all, if anyone else but Eddie had asked him the same question, he would have lied. It had taken a lot of time to get to where he was now, knowing the truth about himself and accepting it, but he still definitely wasn't comfortable talking about it.

He didn't expect Eddie to say yes, he just wanted to get a sense of

where he was, if anywhere. But the truth was, boys didn't kiss other boys the way that Eddie had kissed him. Not in Derry. Which meant Eddie was more likely somewhere than nowhere.

'In that case, what happened the other night?' Richie asked carefully.

Eddie had asked himself the same question a thousand times. 'I don't know. It was an overwhelming day.'

'I can see that,' Richie acknowledged. 'So, stripping out the unknowns for a second, sticking to the facts, what happened?'

'You didn't come to lunch,' Eddie blinked. 'I went to find you. I heard your song. I thought it was about Bev. We went to your house. I found out that it's about me. I found out,' he choked, then rattled off, 'you love me. You apologised. I hugged you. You kissed me. You apologised again. I kissed you. I left.'

Richie felt like he was on fire, hearing Eddie admit that the second kiss was one he initiated. 'I kissed you, then you kissed me,' he summarised, choosing to omit the other crucial detail, which was his soul-crushing love for the boy beside him.

'We kissed,' Eddie amended.

'Well, yes,' Richie said leadingly, 'but I categorically would not have kissed you that second time if you hadn't been the one who –'

'Alright, alright,' Eddie said, a little too loudly.

Gently, Richie said, 'This is confusing for me too, you know.'

It had been one thing to pine for Eddie for all these years, but the obsession had always been hampered with a great caveat that hung like a flashing neon sign: unrequited. One-sided. Hopeless. Never going to happen.

He'd never let himself think for more than a few seconds that Eddie maybe meant more when he showered Richie with attention or looked after him when he was hurt, that maybe Eddie stole glances and touches in the same way he did, that they danced around each other, like a masquerade ball.

‘I liked it how it was before,’ Eddie muttered. ‘It was easy. It made sense.’

‘Maybe for you.’ Richie winced, ‘Are you saying you would take it back if you could?’

Everything logical, rational and sensible in Eddie said yes. There was another side to him, though, the side which let him jump from the quarry cliff edge, the side that walked into the Neibolt house, the side that Richie had always, always brought out in him.

‘I don’t know.’

Smacking his lips together, Richie mused, ‘Okay. That’s not as good as a no and not as bad as a yes.’

Not as good as a no. Not as bad as a yes. As good as a no. As bad as a yes. To Richie, there was a right answer and a wrong answer, like in a math problem. To Eddie, it seemed so much more complicated, like a ten thousand word history dissertation.

There were a lot of bad things which instantly sprang to mind attached to a no, but clearly to Richie there were a lot of good things too. Eddie hadn’t really thought about those beyond the obsessive loop in his head which replayed their kisses in visceral detail, beyond the part of him which craved another.

‘Would you do it again?’ Eddie asked.

Richie raised his eyebrow suggestively. ‘Is that a question or a request?’

‘A question,’ Eddie clarified quickly, indignantly.

Licking his lower lip, letting himself imagine it, Richie said, ‘Yes, I would, but I doubt that’s much of a surprise.’

Still, Eddie needed to hear it. Not because he didn’t know that it would be Richie’s answer, but because he wanted to know how it would make him feel. The answer: somehow both hot and cold, like on the rare occasion when he really had a high fever, when the sweat trickled down his spine and froze across his forehead, when he

shivered even though he was shrouded in blankets.

‘Would you do it again?’ Richie asked, a tremor of fear creeping into his voice. He dispelled it by adding, ‘That’s a question,’ with a wry smirk.

Eddie hated that his answer remained the same as for the previous. ‘I don’t know.’

‘Okay,’ Richie sighed, sitting up. ‘Elaborate.’

‘Elaborate?’

Richie shuffled. ‘Why don’t you know? What don’t you know? What’s the thought process?’

Eddie looked at him. He thought about how easy it would be to lean over and press their lips together again, knowing that Richie would accept his kiss. He wondered what he would do if Richie dared to come to him, if he saw his face hovering in front of him, whether he would be able to stop him or if he would succumb.

‘I feel like we shouldn’t do it again,’ Eddie said quietly.

Heart sinking, Richie just said, ‘Oh.’

Finding Richie’s sad eyes broke something in Eddie. ‘We shouldn’t,’ he said again, ‘but –’

There was a pause where Richie tried to wait for Eddie to continue of his own accord. Eventually, it became too much for him to bear. ‘But?’

‘I want to,’ Eddie admitted, throat constricting around the last word so that it barely escaped his mouth.

It took every ounce of self-control within his core to keep Richie rooted to the spot, to keep him silent.

Eddie let himself submit to the fantasy, as he had done so many times that weekend. ‘I can’t stop thinking about it.’

‘Really?’ Richie stammered, fighting to resist the pull that Eddie had on him and losing.

‘I can’t stop thinking.’ Eddie almost considered ending his sentence there, since it was true. He hadn’t been able to stop thinking, not for a moment, and he’d still never got as close to an answer as in the few minutes that Richie had been sat again in front of him. He finished, ‘About you.’

‘Careful, Eds,’ Richie warned, leaning closer, ‘or I *will* do it again.’

Unconsciously, Eddie licked his lips as he mirrored Richie, synchronised. ‘Would you?’ he asked. Then, to alleviate his own tension, he added, ‘That’s a request.’

There was a flash of a grin that spread across Richie’s face, before he pressed his mouth to Eddie’s gleefully. His hand drew up to Eddie’s jaw, tracing its arc with his thumb. Tensing as Eddie raised a hand as though to push him away, he pulled back, unsure if he could take that rejection twice.

‘What?’ Eddie asked nervously, as he pressed the flat of his palm softly to Richie’s chest.

‘Nothing,’ Richie dismissed, then kissed him again, harder, hoisting his leg up and over Eddie’s thighs to straddle him, arms pinned either side of his head. He tore off his glasses and flung them onto the other pillow.

Eddie let his hands slip from Richie’s chest upwards until they nestled into the knotted curls on the back of his head. He felt both like he was trapped by Richie and guarded by him, weighed down and suspended, as their lips came together again and again.

‘Fuck,’ Richie gushed, opening his blue eyes to find Eddie’s brown ones staring up at him.

‘Yeah,’ Eddie agreed, surprising even himself.

A thousand intimate touches threaded through Richie’s mind, but he didn’t quite feel that he could make them yet. Three words cycled around his brain, forming behind his teeth in the hollows of his

mouth; he forced them back down.

‘Eddie, tell me that you want to keep doing this,’ Richie entreated, his voice low and guttural. ‘I’m not crazy, am I? This is good.’

It did something to Eddie when he spoke like that. He’d heard a thousand imitations and accents spill out of Richie’s mouth, but this was new. It seemed like a voice that had been reserved only for him.

‘You’re not crazy,’ Eddie assured. ‘It feels,’ he inhaled sharply, backtracking. ‘I want to.’

‘Thank fuck.’

Richie kissed him again. As he started to pull away, he felt Eddie’s neck craning away from the pillow, trying to sustain the kiss for as long as possible. He sat up and raked a hand through his hair, looking down and seeing Eddie underneath him, disbelieving and euphoric.

‘Alright, I should probably go before your mom gets jealous.’

Eddie regarded him with contempt and pushed him off his body. ‘Gross, Richie. A new level of gross.’

Richie snickered, ‘Oh, this opens up so many more avenues. There are layers now.’

‘God, I hate you,’ Eddie said breathily, and he’d never said it quite like that before.

‘I’ll see you at school,’ Richie said, climbing off the bed. ‘Oh, and we’re going to the movies next week. All the Losers, I mean. Thursday, I think.’

Eddie followed him to the door. ‘Sure,’ he said, trying to reconcile the Richie he had kissed with the Richie who was his friend. They seemed like different people in his head. Still, he couldn’t avoid the Losers forever, else they would know something was wrong, and the last thing he wanted was for anyone to start asking questions. ‘Sounds good.’

‘Night, Spaghetti,’ Richie said.

Eddie rolled his eyes, ‘Night, Trashmouth.’

Richie dithered for a moment, then quickly pressed his lips to Eddie’s cheek, and left.

The colour flushed up into Eddie’s face as Richie vanished. Instinctively he drew a hand up to his face, dancing his fingers over the space where Richie had kissed him, as though it were imprinted there in scarlet lipstick, or it had left a bruise.

He turned around and stared at his bed, thinking about the fact that he’d been lying there, with Richie on top of him, Richie’s mouth on his, his hands in Richie’s hair. He kept hearing the soft tut of their kisses, kept feeling Richie’s shallow breaths against his skin, kept tasting him even now as he licked his lips.

‘What the fuck?’ Eddie mouthed to himself, locking his hands behind his head. ‘The fuck am I doing?’

3. Nickname

Summary for the Chapter:

Back at school, everything is exactly as it always is, but Eddie is seeing it all in a different light. Richie is just being Richie, and Eddie can't stand it.

'Morning,' Richie greeted, his shoulder crashing noisily into the closed locker beside Eddie's. The guitar was strapped to his back. Of course it was.

'Morning,' Eddie returned, trying not to look at him too long. 'Got a lesson?'

'Yeah, but I'm gonna have lunch with you today.' He blushed, then rambled, 'You all. All of you.'

For once, Eddie wouldn't have hated it if Richie had been absent. That meant that lunchtime would be the first time that they were all hanging out together. He'd hoped it would be the movie theatre later that week, where he wouldn't be obliged to talk much and could sit as far away from Richie as possible.

'You don't have to,' Eddie said as Richie went to his own locker and slipped the guitar inside, then gathered his books.

'I want to, Eds,' Richie promised, smiling at him. It was a soft smile.

'Don't call me Eds,' he said, searching for the normalcy he needed.

Bill blundered over, his arm around Bev. 'Honestly, you sh-should just give in at this p-point.'

'Morning, Billiam,' Richie grinned.

'Bill's right,' Bev agreed, chuckling. 'Nicknames stick.'

Saluting, Richie said, 'Ringwald.' Then, as though it were the most natural thing in the world, he threw his arm over Eddie's shoulder.

A week ago, Eddie would have thought nothing of it, even enjoyed the weight of Richie's arm around his neck, almost protective. Now he was noticing the way that Richie's fingertips grazed his collarbone, the way Richie's bony hip bumped into his side, the scent of his laundry detergent.

He looked over at Bev and Bill, in the same position. The lines of Richie's song came back to him:

I'll wrap my arm around your shoulder

The only way I get to hold ya.

Still, he didn't know if he could shrug Richie off without it being obvious to his friends that something had happened between them. So he just started to walk, trying to join in with the conversation as though it were any other day.

'Right,' Richie said as he relinquished Eddie, needing to head further up the corridor to a different classroom. 'See you all at lunch.' He blew each of them a kiss in turn, reserving Eddie for last, to whom he also threw a wink.

Mortified, Eddie wandered into the class and quickly sat down. Having kissed Bev lightly in the hallway before she went into the room opposite, Bill came and sat beside him.

'Are you alright, m-mate?' he asked.

'Yeah,' Eddie said, 'I'm fine.'

Secrets ached to spill out. *Richie writes his own music. Richie can sing. Richie wrote a song about me. Richie likes boys. Richie likes me. Richie loves me. Richie kissed me. Richie kissed me again. And again. And again. And again. And again.*

'You sure? We m-missed you this w-weekend.'

The secrets kept coming. *I wanted him to kiss me. I let him kiss me. I kissed him back. I want to kiss him again. I will kiss him again. I like kissing him.*

'I said I'm fine,' Eddie said curtly. To curb the questions against him, he asked, 'What movie are we seeing this week?' He didn't listen to the answer.

A final secret popped into his head. Not even a secret he knew he had, not a thought he had uncovered before. Probably the biggest secret of them all.

I like that he likes me.

'Long time no see,' Ben said, raising his eyebrows at Eddie when he sat down at lunch. 'Manage to get all your work done?'

'Just about,' Eddie mumbled, his eyes flicking up and down as Richie slid onto the bench opposite him.

'What were you stuck on?' Stan asked. 'I could have helped.'

Richie cocked his head, chewing. 'It was a math problem, wasn't it, Eds?'

'No,' Eddie said, glaring at him.

'Was it that Biology stuff from Miss Keenan?' Stan asked. 'That was a bitch.'

Eddie nodded, happy to jump on any alternate answer. 'Yeah, I'd just put it off all week.'

'Hey, Spaghetti man,' Richie said, poking his arm, grinning from ear to ear. 'What makes me like Biology homework?'

'That you're annoying and I wish you'd go away?' Eddie said through gritted teeth.

'Nope,' Richie smirked. 'You can do me on a desk all night and then

your mom will check me out.'

Bill shot milk out of his nose as he and Bev roared into laughter. The milk only made her laugh more. Stan stared him down disapprovingly as Ben hiccupped on his food, and Mike chuckled, 'My God, Eddie, your face is a *picture* right now.'

Eddie's jaw had dropped open in pure disbelief that Richie would even dare to make such a joke in his presence. He picked a rogue crumb from between his teeth with his tongue and blinked at him steadily. 'Well, I've lost my appetite,' he feigned sarcasm.

'I could do with a cigarette,' Bev announced.

'Me too,' Richie concurred. 'Gonna pop to the bathroom first, though.'

'Me too,' Eddie said, standing up with his tray and flashing his eyes at him.

Richie gulped and followed Eddie to dispense their trash and then out into the hall. They walked in silence to the bathroom.

Eddie checked that they were alone, then turned to him angrily, jabbing a finger in his chest. 'You need to stop.'

'Stop what?' Richie asked, batting his eyelashes.

'You know what,' Eddie said, screwing his nose up. 'All your nicknames and your teasing and your jokes and your touching.'

Richie leaned against the lip of the sink. 'You mean, stop doing all the stuff that we always do, every day of our lives?'

'We don't,' Eddie started, then stopped, realising he had no argument down that strain. 'It's different now.'

Richie cocked an eyebrow coyly, 'Is it?'

'Isn't it?' Eddie spat back, but he was asking himself as much as he was Richie. Quieter, but no less angry, he stammered, 'It should be different.'

‘Should it?’

‘Yes!’ Eddie gasped. ‘Fucking Christ, you’re driving me up the wall.’

Richie pouted, ‘Didn’t I always?’

‘Stop looking so fucking smug,’ Eddie hissed, stepping closer to him, furious with the expression on Richie’s face, hating that he was so clearly enjoying riling him up like he always did, hating especially how palpable he felt the tension stretched between them.

‘Smug is my default,’ Richie joked, smiling as he leaned forwards slightly.

Suddenly nervous, Eddie’s voice dropped, ‘Well, knock it off. It’s infuriating.’

Richie locked his eyes, ‘What’s infuriating is that I can’t kiss you right now.’

Eddie huffed, exasperated. It was not the time or place for Richie to get flirtatious and yet the audacity of it made his heart flutter. ‘How did you use to manage?’

‘I teased you,’ Richie said carefully. ‘I made jokes.’ He grazed his hand up Eddie’s wrist, ‘Touched you.’

Shivering, Eddie breathed, ‘But you do that all the time.’

‘Yeah, I know.’ He sighed, gripping Eddie’s forearm.

‘Then I guess we’re fucked,’ Eddie said, shaking as he slipped his arm from Richie’s hold. He walked out.

‘Where’s Eddie?’ Richie asked, slurping soda to hide his anxiety.

He had barely seen Eddie since Monday lunchtime, as Eddie had

made a conscious effort to avoid him. He'd taken the opportunity to return to the music block at lunchtime to play so that he didn't have to deal with Eddie ignoring him directly.

'I'm here,' Eddie said, appearing beside him, his eyelids low.

'Richie got you a popcorn,' Ben said, smiling.

Eddie mumbled, 'Course he did. Thanks.' He looked at the container in Richie's hands. 'A sharing bucket?'

He shrugged, 'It's cheaper than two smalls.'

Math problem. 'Fine,' Eddie sighed. 'You know the rule. Wash up. I don't know where you've been.'

'Ask your mom,' Richie grinned.

'Fuck you.'

Bev chuckled, 'You guys never change.'

'We'll save you b-both a seat,' Bill promised.

Bev's words rotated in Eddie's brain. They'd always been like this, in her mind. They'd always been like this in everyone's mind. Only now he recognised how overtly Richie was flirting with him, how often he made excuses to be near him, how much attention he devoted to him. It seemed so obvious; he wondered how he had ever missed it. He wondered if the other Losers could see it too.

Eddie washed his hands stoically beside Richie, glaring at the popcorn.

'It's supposed to be a peace offering,' Richie said gently.

'Let's just watch the fucking movie.' Eddie said, drying his hands and trying to leave.

Richie grabbed for his wrist. 'Look, Eds, the last thing I want to do is actually piss you off or make you uncomfortable.'

‘Well, you did. I am,’ Eddie wrenched from his grasp.

‘I’ll stop,’ Richie said quickly, his heart throbbing at the idea that he, of all people, had hurt Eddie. ‘With the jokes.’

Eddie stared at him. ‘What?’

‘I’ll stop. I’ll leave you alone. I’ll give you space.’ He laughed, ‘Fuck, I’ll ignore you, if you want.’

Eddie could see that he meant it, and that was bizarre to see. Usually, Richie worked tirelessly to get the biggest reaction out of Eddie that he could. He relished making Eddie irate, forcing himself into his personal space and slowly grinding his patience down.

‘I don’t want to screw up, Eds,’ Richie said honestly.

Knowing that he needed to act normal in front of his friends for the duration of a movie and that they didn’t have the time now, Eddie suggested, softening, ‘Let’s talk about it later, okay?’

‘Okay,’ Richie nodded. ‘Sure.’ A conversation was better than Eddie storming away or snubbing him, a big step in the right direction. Progress.

They went into the dark cinema screening, locating the Losers on the back row, where they had managed to secure seven seats all together. There were two on the end for Richie and Eddie, in the back corner. They squeezed past everyone’s legs and sat down, setting the bucket of popcorn on the arm rest between them.

As the movie went on, Bill and Bev started to hold hands and periodically kiss beside them. Richie stared at them with violent, burning envy, stuffing his face with popcorn. He hated how easy it had been for them, how they could be together so freely, without having to answer so many hard questions about themselves along the way.

Eddie noticed that Richie was subdued. Overindulgence was one of the signs, as was his restless knee. He thought about the look that he had seen in Richie’s eyes when he’d told Eddie that he didn’t want to screw up: fear. Eddie remembered that they were both afraid. They

were just afraid of different things.

It's only you that I'm afraid for

There's no one that I wouldn't trade for

Surreptitiously, Eddie brought his hand down onto the seat beside him, beneath the armrest. He extended his fingers enough to graze the side of Richie's leg. He flinched instinctively but didn't glance away from the screen.

After a second, Richie slid his own hand down, so that his smallest finger brushed against Eddie's. Richie flicked his eyes to the side and saw that Eddie was looking at him. He didn't move, his eyes scanning Eddie's profile.

Slowly, Eddie twisted his wrist and burrowed his hand under Richie's. Each nerve ending in their fingertips sizzled with energy as they laced their fingers together. As Richie gently grazed his thumb back and forth over Eddie's, they exhaled raggedly, inaudibly.

The remainder of the popcorn went untouched.

Eddie woke to a tapping at his window. He blinked in disbelief as he saw Richie waving, propping himself up by the branch of the tree outside. Rapidly clambering out of bed, he raised the window.

'Richie, are you insane?' he hissed.

'Let me in,' Richie grinned.

'What? No!' Eddie furrowed his brow. 'It's like two in the morning.'

Richie recited, 'You said you wanted to talk later.'

Eddie yawned, 'I meant like a hypothetical later. Tomorrow, for

instance.'

'Technically,' Richie said, cocking his head, 'it is tomorrow.'

Sighing, Eddie stepped back, 'Get in for fuck's sake. Before you fall to your death.'

He did. 'That'd be something to explain, eh?'

'Please be quiet,' Eddie begged, wincing at every step Richie made. 'If my mom catches you we'll both be dead.'

'Like Romeo and Juliet,' Richie mooned, swanning over to him.

Through gritted teeth, Eddie growled, 'You're not funny.'

Richie smiled as he stepped directly in front of Eddie, 'Hi.'

'Hi, asshat,' Eddie said, catching Richie's infectious smile. Giddy from the thrill of having someone in his bedroom without his mother's permission, let alone someone that his mother hated and would hate more if she only knew, Eddie craned his chin up to kiss him, sliding his hands around Richie's waist.

Richie brought his hand to Eddie's neck, surprised at the greeting. They'd never kissed on arrival before. He hoped that it was a sign that Eddie was forgiving him, but he knew they still had to talk about it.

'I'm sorry,' Richie said. 'For the jokes and stuff. There's probably a line and I just don't know where it is anymore.'

Eddie thought, 'I'm not sure either. But jokes that directly refer to,' he paused, 'whatever it is that's happening are definitely out.'

Pouting, Richie agreed, 'Yeah, okay. I guess, fuck, I'm just a bit excited, Eds. I thought, in a twisted way, that you might find it kinda fun.'

'Maybe it would be if we were both in the same place,' Eddie said carefully, 'but we're not. You have such a huge head start on me and I'm not even sure I'm in the same race.'

‘It’s not a race.’

Eddie sighed, ‘My point is that I need time.’

‘Okay,’ Richie nodded, and Eddie visibly relaxed. ‘Do you want me to dial it back or stop completely?’

‘I don’t want you to stop being you, and I don’t want our friendship to change, so I don’t want you to stop completely, but it does need to seriously dial back.’

Richie tried to ignore the possibly dangerous sentiment sandwiched in what Eddie had just said: *I don’t want our friendship to change*. He distracted himself. ‘So I get to kiss you in private and occasionally insult you in public?’

Eddie rolled his eyes. ‘This is like icing on the fucking cupcake for you, isn’t it?’

‘Are you saying you’re a cupcake?’ Richie batted his eyelashes.

Grimacing, Eddie walked away from him, ‘No, Richie. It’s a fucking metaphor.’

‘My new nickname for you?’ he laughed darkly, chasing after him. ‘Cupcake?’

His eyes wide, Eddie swore, ‘I will kill you if you *dare*.’

Richie caught him, hauling his body closer. ‘I didn’t mean in public.’

‘I don’t care,’ Eddie shook his head, miming vomiting. ‘You are never calling me fucking *cupcake*.’ He laughed, settling into Richie’s embrace. ‘Spaghetti is bad enough as it is.’

‘Spaghetti fits you better anyway,’ Richie’s cheeks coloured, knowing that Eddie was going to hate the joke he was going to make, but was too pleased about to keep to himself.

‘Why?’ Eddie asked, dotting kisses along the line of Richie’s jaw.

‘Because you’re straight,’ he spluttered, ‘until I –’

Pulling back, Eddie glared at him, his cheeks burning. 'I should have pushed you out of the window.'

Laughing nervously, Richie said, 'I feel like that was the line. I found it.'

'You're on thin fucking ice, Tozier,' Eddie said. 'That was way over the line.' He let Richie stew in the panic for another second, then smiled, knowing Richie hadn't meant harm by it.

If anything, the joke actually alleviated some of Eddie's concern. Maybe he really could still be straight and have Richie be the exception to the rule. Besides, it was only kissing. Kissing didn't have to mean anything.

Snickering, Richie chucked Eddie's chin, 'I will warn you that if I can't make as many jokes at your expense in public then it's going to get way, way worse when we're alone.'

'Then I'll have to find a way to make you shut up before you say something stupid.'

You're the only way to shut me up.

Because I will never tell you.

'That's probably a good idea,' Richie said, grazing his nose against Eddie's.

Eddie kissed him. He wasn't sure if it was the tiredness laying heavy in his bones, the thick night air or the growing familiarity of Richie's lips on his, but he sunk into the kiss deeper than he ever had before, letting himself enjoy it, draping his arms around Richie's neck.

Richie felt electric. His hands moved down from Eddie's waist to his hips, slipping just underneath the hem of Eddie's shirt to rest on the bare skin, grazing his thumb above the elastic of Eddie's pyjama bottoms. When Eddie showed no resistance, he let his hand slide up under Eddie's shirt, along the contours of his abdomen.

The touch stirred something primal in Eddie. He snatched his lips from Richie's and even as Richie whined, trying to find them again,

Eddie didn't allow him the satisfaction. Instead, he brought his hand around underneath Richie's jaw and pushed it upwards, exposing his throat.

As Eddie's lips trailed down his neck, Richie had to bite his lip to keep from whimpering, inhaling in short, sharp bursts as his nails dug into Eddie's sides. Eventually he had to grab Eddie's face with both his hands to get him to stop, as his blood was pooling southwards at an alarming speed. He kissed him softly, trying to slow them down.

It worked, and Eddie wasn't sure if he was grateful or left wanting as they halted.

'I imagine you need me to go home at some point,' Richie said.

Eddie glanced over at the window. 'I don't want you to try and climb down in the dark.'

'I climbed up in the dark,' Richie countered. 'Besides, what's the alternative? It's not like I can go out the front door.'

Flashing his eyes to his bedroom door, as though Sonia Kasprak could be standing on the other side of it, Eddie said, 'You can stay here. We'll figure a way to sneak you out in the morning.'

Terrified, Richie asked, 'Really?'

Eddie wasn't even sure what he was saying at this point; he was so exhausted. He went to the dresser and threw Richie a pair of his pyjamas. 'Here.'

'These won't fit,' Richie complained.

Blushing, Eddie insisted, 'Well, you're wearing something so it's either what you've got on or my pyjamas. Your call.'

'Can't argue with that.' Richie said, and chose the pyjamas.

They stood on different sides of the bed, turned towards their respective walls as they changed. Both tried not to think about the brief moments where chests and legs would be exposed. Eddie gave

into a curious urge to glance over his shoulder and watched as Richie tugged the collar of his shirt from behind his neck to remove his shirt.

He'd seen Richie's bare back before, of course, when they'd been down to swim in the quarry, for instance, so he didn't know why it felt so different to see it now, to watch the shoulder blades shift underneath his skin, the flex and relax of his muscles, the appearance and disappearance of the nodules of his spine.

Once he had the sleep shirt on, Richie turned around and caught Eddie looking at him, who immediately flushed scarlet and pretended he hadn't been. Richie wasn't going to let it slide. 'What you looking at, Eds?'

'Nothing,' Eddie squeaked, scurrying under his duvet. 'Sorry.'

'You can look,' Richie said, climbing in beside him, taking off his glasses. 'I don't mind.'

Eddie choked, 'But I shouldn't.'

Richie groaned, crashing down onto the pillow. 'Why not?'

Seeing Richie remove his shirt had flooded Eddie with guilt. It had become temporarily impersonal, unemotional, physical. He'd been bombarded with his own internal monologue, berating him for looking at his friend that way. It wasn't like when they kissed, when Eddie had his eyes closed and was stimulated by Richie's touch, when he stopped thinking and just listened, felt.

'I shouldn't want this.'

'This?' Richie rocked his head to the side to look at Eddie's face in profile.

'Us,' Eddie said, without thinking.

Richie's heart swelled. 'There's an 'us'?'

'No. I mean, not yet.'

‘Yet?’

‘Well, I don’t know what this is yet, what we are yet, if anything,’ Eddie said quickly, trying to shut the ideas down in Richie’s mind, but it was too late and he was saying the wrong things.

Biting his lip as though between his teeth he held his last thread of hope, Richie asked, ‘Is there a chance that it’s nothing?’

‘Richie,’ Eddie begged, closing his eyes.

He pressed, ‘Is there?’

Somehow Eddie found the strength to look at him. There was that fear in his eyes again, eyes that he felt tearing through his skin, desperate to reach something buried deep inside him. Eddie looked at the lips he had kissed and would kiss again, feeling the coil in his stomach thread itself into a knot.

‘I need to know,’ Richie said quietly.

Richie’s face. Richie’s face that he knew better than his own, that had greeted him almost every day since they were little. Richie’s face that until he heard the song, had just been a face that he liked, a friendly face, a familiar face. He’d never let himself think about Richie in any other way.

I’ve memorised the valleys of your face

Could sing the notes in how you say my name.

‘Eddie?’

Now that the wall had come down, now that he knew how Richie felt, now that he knew what it was like to have Richie kiss him, that face looked entirely different. It glowed, and Eddie could lose himself in those dotting eyes, craved the touch of his lips, felt hot and scared and aching.

Eddie exhaled heavily, rolling onto his side to face him. He slid a hand around Richie’s neck and felt the rapid rate of his pulse. ‘No,’ he said, his own fear writhing inside him. ‘It’s not nothing.’

‘It’s not?’

‘I don’t see how it could be,’ Eddie sighed.

Richie pushed, ‘Why not?’

‘Because it would be so much easier to not do this, Rich,’ Eddie strained. ‘It would be smarter. Safer.’ He hated the word he was about to say, ‘Cleaner.’

‘Cleaner?’

His voice thick, Eddie said, ‘This is so fucking messy, Richie. It’s already so fucking messy and fuck, it could get way messier. Like you said before, we’re gambling. And we have a lot to fucking lose. Our friends. Our parents.’ He struggled, as so many other things tumbled through his mind that he couldn’t even bear to say, ‘Each other.’

‘Hey,’ Richie said, reaching for Eddie and pulling him close. ‘Listen to me, okay? No matter what, I swear you won’t lose me. Even if this was nothing, you wouldn’t lose me. Even if you break my fucking heart. Even if you woke up in the morning and told me you want to forget the whole thing.’

Eddie’s lower lip trembled. ‘Okay.’

Hopelessly, Richie breathed, ‘I loved you before this started and I’ll still love you tomorrow, and as long as you want me around, I will be.’

Eddie expected himself to be scared, had dreaded the idea of Richie actually referencing that he loved him to his face, thinking it too real, too serious, too intense, a step far beyond what he was able to process. But when the moment actually came, Eddie felt peaceful.

‘Technically,’ Eddie sniffed, ‘it is tomorrow.’

‘And I’m here,’ Richie promised, his last word falling into Eddie’s mouth as Eddie kissed him once more.

4. Laundry

Summary for the Chapter:

Eddie realises that Richie's spontaneity is putting them both at risk when he wakes up to Richie in his bed.

When Eddie woke to the rattle of his alarm, he felt the noise echoing inside his body. Richie was still in his bed, lying beside him, and he needed to get out quickly. Richie groaned as the alarm disturbed him, and as his eyes stickily opened, Eddie noticed a moment of confusion before he remembered where he was.

‘Morning,’ Eddie squeaked.

‘Shit,’ Richie muttered.

‘Eddie!’ Sonia Kaspbrak called from the other end of the hall. ‘Are you up, sweetheart?’

Eddie called back tremulously, scrambling out of bed, ‘Yeah, yeah, I’m up.’

‘What do I do?’ Richie whispered.

Sonia boomed again, ‘Do you want to shower first?’

‘Uh, yeah,’ Eddie responded, then hissed at Richie, ‘Get dressed. When she’s in the bathroom we can sneak you out the front door.’

Richie nodded and climbed out of the bed, reaching for his clothes. By the time he turned around, Eddie had vanished into the hallway, and he instantly started to panic. The only comfort was knowing that his own parents would have left the house so early for work that they wouldn’t notice Richie hadn’t spent the night there.

‘Do you have any laundry?’ Sonia called, and Richie’s stomach dropped.

‘No!’ Eddie cried desperately from the bathroom.

‘I’ll just go and check,’ Sonia insisted, and Richie heard her elephant feet thudding menacingly along the corridor.

Out of options, Richie darted for the window, hauled it open, and gripped onto the branches of the tree. He prayed his sweating palms would not weaken his grip as he let his feet slip from the window sill. Through the pane, he watched Sonia open the bedroom door. If she turned, she would see him dangling there.

As fast as he could manage, he inched along the branch to the tree trunk, and hastily descended, hoping that he hadn’t been spotted. His feet squished into the grass and his body quivered with adrenaline. He dusted his hands on his jeans and considered bolting but then, with a smirk, he leaned himself up against the brickwork and waited.

When Eddie came out of the bathroom, after what might have been the briefest shower of his life, he darted back into his bedroom and was stunned to find Richie gone, after peering into his wardrobe and under his bed. Hastily, he dressed, wondering where else in his house Richie might be.

The doorbell rang. Eddie pelted downstairs calling, ‘I’ll answer it, mom.’ He swung open the door.

‘Morning, Eds,’ Richie grinned. ‘Ready to go?’

Relief swathed through Eddie as Sonia reappeared at the top of the stairs. ‘Good morning, Richie,’ she said through pursed lips. She’d hoped that her son would have grown out of Richie by now, but as the years had gone by they’d only grown closer, much to her chagrin.

‘Not ready just yet,’ Eddie said carefully, opening the door for him. ‘Do you want toast?’

After they ate and Eddie’s hair began to air-dry, they slipped out of the house. Eddie grabbed his bike and walked it the distance to Richie’s house so that Richie could grab his own vehicle.

‘Why the fuck wouldn’t you just let her shower first and get me out of there?’ Richie chided as they mounted.

Eddie pulled a face, ‘Would you want to use a shower straight after

my mom?’

‘I often shower with your mom. It’s one of her favourite spots.’

‘You’re the worst,’ Eddie said. ‘Smooth going, though. Getting out.’

Richie beamed, ‘I’m actually really proud of myself.’

Eddie frowned, ‘Although you are wearing the same clothes as yesterday.’

Scoffing, Richie complained, ‘It’s not like I brought an overnight bag. I haven’t brushed my fucking teeth either.’

‘Gross,’ Eddie mumbled. ‘Still, you could have borrowed a shirt, Rich.’

‘Nah, you’re too little,’ Richie teased. ‘It’d be like a crop-top on me.’

‘Fuck off.’

Richie smiled at him softly, ‘No one will notice.’

As they rode, Eddie scolded himself for taking such a risk, for offering Richie a bed for the night. If his mother had caught them, then he dreaded to think what might have happened. He didn’t know really why he had done it, outside of his concern for Richie descending via the window, which he knew Richie probably could have managed without breaking his legs.

If he wanted to see Richie again, alone and in secret, then there had to be some kind of structure, some kind of plan, some escape route. Richie’s spontaneity could be dangerous for them both if he continued to turn up unannounced.

They pulled up outside the school grounds and went to chain their bikes. As they leaned down to the wheels to lock them, Eddie whispered, ‘When can I next see you?’

Shocked, Richie snapped his head up and knocked it against his handlebars. ‘Fuck,’ he seethed, then suggested, ‘Tonight too soon?’

Eddie shook his head disapprovingly, standing up. 'You're so fucking keen.'

'Would you rather I played hard to get?' Richie grinned.

'Not tonight,' Eddie said, fighting his own smile. 'I've got plans later with Bill. What about the weekend?'

Richie trilled his lips, 'I'm working double shifts.'

'Well, I can't do evenings next week. I've got this stupid chemistry project,' Eddie groaned. 'Stan and I are going to do it together.'

'Kinky,' Richie joked, and Eddie hit him.

'Have to be next weekend then,' Eddie said, glancing over his shoulder to check that nobody was listening in on their conversation.

Richie grumbled, 'That's so long to wait.'

Eddie wondered how long Richie had been waiting up to this point. 'You'll live,' he said, rolling his eyes as he turned to walk away.

'Don't be so sure,' Richie challenged, and followed him into the building.

Remembering the conversation they had shared, Richie itched to throw his arms around Eddie's shoulder, but fought the urge. If Eddie wanted him to dial it back, then Richie would, especially if doing so resulted in Eddie's deep kisses and offers to spend the night.

He tingled when he relived the moment Eddie asked when he could see him again, already thinking about a next time, wanting a next time, knowing there would be a next time. His gut gurgled when he considered how many days and nights had to pass before then.

It was so much harder to think of waiting mere days now than it had been before. He figured that it was because he knew that the next kiss was coming, rather than an endless stretch of never. It was tangible now; something real and satisfying.

At their lockers, Stan came over, raising his eyebrows. 'No guitar

today, Richie? Never thought I'd see the day.'

Richie had dropped it home before the movies yesterday and forgotten to pick it up this morning. 'Broke a string,' he lied, slamming the locker shut.

Eddie stared at him, concerned at the ease of this convincing falsehood, but Richie didn't catch his eye.

'You got a replacement?' Stan asked, pouting.

Richie nodded, 'Oh, yeah. I've got G-strings lying all over my bedroom.'

Bev laughed as she sidled up beside him, 'Yeah. It's just a pity that they're all yours.'

'Not mine,' Richie laughed, then snapped his fingers at Stan, 'but tell your mom I do plan on returning them at some point.'

Stan blinked at him, 'Don't you mean Eddie's mom?'

Richie shook his head, recovering, 'No, my darling Sonia doesn't bother with underwear.'

Eddie frowned, 'Fuck you.'

Without so much as looking at him, Richie threw his arm around Bev's shoulder. 'Where's Big Bill?' he asked.

Bev shrugged, 'Haven't seen him yet. Maybe he's running late.'

'Then I shall escort you to class, m'lady,' he offered in a horrendous British accent.

'Are you out of cigs or something?' she asked, laughing at the gesture. 'Do you need to bum one later?'

'Could I?' he scrunched up his nose, and they started to wander off down the corridor.

As Eddie and Stan walked behind them, Eddie stared at the back of

Richie's head, decidedly shaken. Since they'd stepped through the thresholds of the school, Richie hadn't looked at him, hadn't touched him, hadn't even directly talked to him. The jibe against his mom had even felt impersonal, a force of habit or a necessary addition following Stan's query. It was jarring.

'Chem project next week,' Stan stated plainly at Eddie as the group hovered outside the classrooms. 'Still want to do it together?'

Eddie waited for Richie to make a joke, presumably the same joke which he'd made to Eddie in private earlier, but he didn't. 'Yeah, sure.' He tested, 'Do you want to do it in the library?' There was no reaction.

'Or should we do it at my house?' Stan said.

Still nothing. 'Sure, let's do it at yours,' Eddie said, and Stan left.

Richie shot Eddie a look as a tardy Bill jogged up the corridor to greet Bev, prising her from Richie's grasp. As the couple took a moment to themselves to kiss, Richie sidled past Eddie close enough to whisper, 'Fucking hell, Eds. You're killing me.' Then he was gone.

The grin spread across Eddie's face before he could stop it. He breathed, then went to class.

At lunchtime, Eddie slid into the seat opposite Richie. He flashed his eyes up at Eddie quickly, once, then went back to eating. Even the briefest eye-contact sent a crackle through Eddie's spine. The other Losers gradually crowded onto the benches.

'Richie, are you wearing the same clothes as yesterday?' Bev asked, and Eddie instinctively tensed.

'Yeah,' he said, through a mouthful of his burger.

‘Why?’ Stan asked, scowling.

‘Still clean,’ Richie shrugged. ‘How dirty do you think I am?’

Stan cocked an eyebrow, ‘Do you really want me to answer that?’

‘Point taken,’ Richie chuckled, then elaborated, ‘Less clothes means less laundry for me to do.’

‘You d-do your o-own laundry?’ Bill asked incredulously.

Self-righteously, Richie batted his eyelashes, ‘Some of us help around the house.’

Stan furrowed his brow, ‘But that would imply you’re a good person.’

‘Has to even out his karma somehow, I guess,’ Eddie said, and by way of concurrence, Richie winked at Stan, who scowled.

Mike chuckled, ‘You must do a *lot* of laundry.’

Ben suggested, ‘Maybe you should start doing the neighbours’ too.’

‘Or,’ Richie countered, ‘I could just do their laundry.’

As the Losers dispersed, Eddie and Richie went back to their lockers to pick up their books for the afternoon’s lessons. Eddie glanced at him, then away. Richie mimicked him seconds later, then grumbled, ‘Now I have to start doing my own fucking laundry.’

Eddie snorted a laugh. ‘You beginning to wonder if it’s worth it?’

Licking his lower lip, Richie scanned his eyes over Eddie, who went pink as he felt Richie’s gaze on him. ‘Not a fucking chance. The things I’d do for you, Eds,’ he trailed off as he closed his locker and walked away.

Swallowing, Eddie watched him go. ‘Jesus Christ,’ he mumbled to himself, then closed his locker.

At the end of the day, Eddie found Richie again by their bicycles. 'Hey,' he greeted.

'Hey,' Richie smiled at him, and Eddie smiled back.

Bill leaned over the wall, 'We s-still on f-for later, Eddie?'

Flinching, Eddie turned and nodded, 'I'll be over after dinner.' Bill shot him a thumbs up, then trotted away, and Eddie climbed onto his bike, cycling down to the road.

Richie followed, pushing against the incline so that he could draw up alongside Eddie. Safely out of the earshot of any other students, Richie said, 'So, I dialled it back.'

Flushing, Eddie concurred, 'You did. I'm impressed.'

'It's not fucking easy,' Richie laughed.

'You made it look easy,' Eddie said honestly.

Richie smirked, 'It's part of my charm. Everything I do seems effortless.'

'Fuck off,' Eddie laughed as they drew up outside Richie's house. They arced up the driveway and into Richie's garage. Eddie leaned to rest his foot on the ground to halt and released the handle to rake a hand through his hair. 'Guess I'll see you at school next week.'

Dismounting, Richie leaned his bike against the wall. He looked at Eddie, then looked at the bright world beyond the open garage door, back again. With a sigh, he said, 'Man, I wish I could kiss you.'

Eddie let his bike clatter to the ground and went to the threshold of the garage, where a cord hung down. He yanked it and the slats noisily slotted down, cradling them in the darkness.

'Surprised you could reach,' Richie teased.

'Shut the fuck up,' Eddie hissed, pushing against his chest and

slamming him into the wall. He kissed him desperately, almost violently, tugging at Richie's lower lip with his teeth until it throbbed red and swollen.

Richie was beside himself. Afraid to put his hands on Eddie for fear of what it might do to them both, they hovered uncertainly centimetres above his shoulders, as though Eddie were shielded by an invisible suit of armour.

Yet, Eddie ached to be touched by him and worried why Richie wasn't doing so. He pulled away, laughing nervously. 'Are you okay?'

Richie panted hotly, reaching for his lip, 'The fuck was that?'

'Sorry,' Eddie shook his head slightly. 'You've been driving me crazy all day.'

'I practically ignored you!' Richie rebuked.

'I know,' Eddie's knees buckled. 'That's what's been driving me crazy.'

Pointedly, Richie let his hands settle onto Eddie's shoulders, delightedly relishing in hearing those words. 'That's only one day,' Richie reminded. 'You've got to make it through another week now.' He said it as though it wouldn't be just as difficult for him to do the same.

Eddie moaned unhappily and gently pressed their lips together again. 'Probably be easier this weekend as I'm not actually seeing you.'

'You could come see me at work,' Richie pouted, running his hands down Eddie's back.

Screwing up his face, Eddie said, 'No way. That place makes so many health code violations.'

Smiling, Richie kissed him lightly. 'Then I'll be seeing and ignoring you again on Monday.'

'Guess so,' Eddie said, releasing him and gathering his bike.

Reluctantly, Richie opened the garage door for him. 'Later,' he said.

'No,' Eddie warned. 'No climbing through my window at the fucking witching hour.'

Richie grinned, 'You see right through me, Eds.'

'Bye, Rich.' Eddie called over his shoulder as he started to ride away.

'Say hi to your mom for me,' Richie hollered after him.

Ignoring each other was proving so much more complicated than expected. Richie found himself constantly prodded towards Eddie, impelled to make jokes for the sake of keeping up appearances. Eddie found himself to be so much quieter in the group when he wasn't engaging with Richie, didn't realise how much Richie's motormouth drove the group's banter and conversation.

Occasionally they were able to snatch glances across the cafeteria or a hallway, share a few whispered words at the lockers or the bike rack, graze skin against each other as they passed pencils or accidentally-on-purpose bumped into one another. Every time they did, it felt like a bolt of electricity, like a lightning storm loomed around them, threatening to spill their secrets.

Richie returned to spending more time with his guitar on his free periods and lunch hours, finding it easier to not spend time with Eddie at all than to have to restrict himself. As Eddie went to Stan's each night, Richie played on, often staying behind in the music block after hours and cycling home in the dusk, then continuing to play there.

Eddie was grateful for the chemistry project, for Stan's unwavering company, to offer him some distraction after the weekend. As Richie had worked his busy shifts, Eddie had mulled tirelessly, questions layering like heavy bricks in his mind, building a wall of unknowns

around his ego.

The lack of Richie's attention had made him crave it in a way he never knew he could, and it fired something inside him that he'd never experienced before; the part which had pushed Richie up against a wall, hard. It was something urgent, dominant, confident, even strangely controlling, and he didn't know what that meant.

On some level that he kept pushing down, he was disturbed by it, but not nearly as much as he was intrigued. It sat hungrily in his core, whining so loudly that Eddie could hardly hear anything else, could hardly hear his own doubts and trepidations or the echoes of his mother's disgusted tone, the pastor's damnations, the bullies' unimaginative slurs.

The weekend drew ever nearer, but still as he cycled to school early and alone on the Friday morning, Eddie felt he couldn't wait any longer. Richie's bike was already chained up, which meant he might be squeezing in some guitar practice before classes started. Eddie made his way hopefully to the music block.

As he wandered up the corridor, he felt eerie déjà vu of discovering Richie singing for the first time, singing his own music, singing the song that he wrote about Eddie. The song that Eddie didn't know was about him even as he listened to it.

Sure enough, Richie was in the same room as he had been before, plucking his fingers admirably over the six strings. Not wanting to eavesdrop again, Eddie knocked quickly and watched Richie's face shoot up, his hands freeze. Then he broke into a smile, a pleasantly surprised smile, and beckoned Eddie in.

'Hey, stranger,' Richie said, draping his arms idly over the instrument.

Eddie closed the door behind him and leaned against it, still gripping the handle behind his back. 'Hey.'

'What are you doing here?' he asked, swinging the guitar off his lap and leaning it against the standing piano.

Dropping his eyes to the floor and back, Eddie shuffled, 'You know what I'm doing here.'

Richie stood and walked slowly over to him. 'You been missing me, Eds?'

Eddie knew what he was supposed to say, what he would usually say in response to a question like this from Richie, the answer that Richie would come to expect at this point. Nevertheless, he couldn't bring himself to say it, not as Richie's lips came so close to his own, as Richie's hands found his waist, as Richie's eyes searched him.

'Yeah,' Eddie breathed honestly, stroking his hands gently up Richie's arms, a touch he hadn't been allowed. 'You been missing me?'

'God yes,' Richie growled, and closed the gap between them. Their lips came together with devastating patience considering their hiatus, each overwhelmed with every nuance of the sensation; the little huffs of breath, the contours of the other's lips, the meeting of their tongues.

Eddie rocked his head back against the door, 'Fucking hell. I can't wait to see you tomorrow. Properly, I mean.'

'This not proper enough for you?' Richie asked, pressing his lips to Eddie's vulnerable throat, which he hadn't done before and so made his heart stutter. He heard Eddie inhale, but couldn't see Eddie helplessly close his eyes, bite his lip to stop from keening.

'Not enough time,' Eddie managed, tugging lightly at Richie's hair to discourage him.

Richie looked at the clock on the wall, steadily ticking past the seconds. 'Got ten minutes or so.'

'Exactly,' Eddie pressed, sliding out of Richie's grip and into the space of the room. 'Not long enough.'

Richie frowned, 'Your mom has never said that.' He winked, 'Not in any context.'

Sitting on the piano stool, Eddie sighed, 'Annoyingly, that's actually

true.'

Smiling at him with affectionate wonder, Richie asked, 'Did you really just come here for a kiss?'

'Yeah,' Eddie blushed, idly letting his fingers dance an arpeggio on the piano keys. 'I know you're practising but I couldn't –' he rambled, then stopped, embarrassed.

Picking up his guitar again, Richie sat down. 'I'm only practising because I couldn't,' he said cryptically.

Eddie looked at the guitar and thought. 'Would you play it again?'

Richie hardened, 'Play what again?'

'The song you wrote about me.'

'No,' Richie scoffed. 'No way.' His cheeks coloured bright red, feet turning inwards.

Eddie didn't want to push it. 'Then play something else. Anything.'

Richie hesitated, but he wasn't going to pass up the opportunity to play for an audience, which he'd come to really enjoy. Let alone that it was Eddie, who was the one he always wanted to like his music the most, whose approval he desired most, whose validation he sought, since he admired Eddie's taste in music more than anyone's.

'Okay,' he said, positioning his hands. 'But I'm not going to fucking sing.'

Eddie wished he would. He wanted to hear his voice again. 'Pussy,' he grumbled, then smiled so that Richie knew he didn't have to.

Richie started to play. The chords swam in the air, filling the small room with harmony, and as he began to pick through the riffs, Eddie grinned.

'This is my favourite song,' Eddie said quietly.

'Yeah, I know, asshole,' Richie replied.

As the verse started, Eddie couldn't help himself from humming the first few bars. Then he half-spoke his way through the lines:

Hoping for the best but expecting the worst

Are you going to drop the bomb or not?

Richie raised his head enough to smile at him, and as that smile hit his eyes, Eddie's lungs filled with air. His voice low, he let the notes hit the lyrics.

Let us die young or let us live forever

We don't have the power but we never say never

He stopped, so Richie encouraged him with his own lilting notes, finishing the broken phrase.

Life is a short trip.

The music's for the sad man.

Eddie smiled and let himself start to sing again, his cheeks burning.

Can you imagine when this race is won?

Turn our golden faces into the sun

Praising our leaders, we're getting in tune

The music's played by the,

He laughed, and Richie finished, crossing his eyes:

The madman.

Eddie grinned, throwing his head back slightly melodramatically, in the hopes that Richie wouldn't judge his voice too harshly, or see just how nervous he was, how preciously he was enjoying this music, this time.

Forever young, I wanna be forever young

Do you really want to live forever?

Forever, and ever

Richie joined him, his voice soft so that Eddie's was louder. Their voices blended together; Eddie's clean and full, Richie's aspirate and licking.

Forever young, I wanna be forever young

Do you really want to live forever?

Forever young

Eddie relaxed, happiness bubbling inside him, liberating. He crooned solo, lost in the tune as Richie watched him admiringly, his heart pounding in perfect rhythm.

Some are like water, some are like the heat

Some are a melody and some are the beat

Sooner or later they all will be gone

Why don't they stay young?

Richie took over, easily done as he locked Eddie's eyes and rendered him almost speechless. He sang louder than he had before, more confidently.

It's so hard to get old without a cause

I don't want to perish like a fading horse

Youth's like diamonds in the sun

And diamonds are forever

Breaking the eye contact to watch Richie's mesmerising fingers dance over the fretboard, the tendons tightening and relaxing, Eddie found his voice to join him again.

So many adventures given up today

So many songs we forgot to play

So many dreams swinging out of the blue

Oh let it come true

As they sang through the last few turns of the chorus, no longer afraid of their own voices, smiling broadly, Richie dared to harmonise beneath Eddie's voice. Eddie stared at him with awe and joy; their own version of his favourite song ringing in his ears, a version he never knew he wanted and prayed that he would hear again.

Do you really want to live forever?

Richie let Eddie sing the last line by himself, unsure if he could sing another note through the weight of the love inside him. Through his life, he'd lost track of all the moments where he'd looked at Eddie and known, without a glimmer of doubt, that he was hopelessly, irretrievably in love with him. It didn't make those moments any easier, any less emotional, when they rolled around. And this, by God, this was one of them.

Forever young.

They were silent for a second, letting themselves just be.

Eddie was the one to break the silence. 'I thought you said you weren't going to sing.'

Richie gasped, 'I am not the liar here. You always told me that you couldn't sing at all.'

Ignoring the implied compliment, Eddie asked, 'When did you learn to play that?'

'It was the first song I tried to learn,' Richie admitted, placing the guitar back in its case.

Eddie's heart squeezed as he climbed off the piano stool. 'Then why haven't I heard you play it yet?'

'I don't know,' Richie lied, swinging the case over his shoulder.

He didn't feel that he could tell Eddie the truth, that playing Eddie's favourite song in front of the other Losers would be almost as hard for him as playing one of his original tracks, that he wouldn't have been able to keep himself from staring at Eddie, wanting him to sing along, wanting to know he'd made him happy. He didn't think he could say that when he'd thought about playing Eddie his favourite song, he'd always hoped that it would be like this.

Eddie walked over to him and softly kissed him. 'Maybe your guitar isn't so bad after all,' he said absentmindedly.

'What the hell is that supposed to mean?' Richie asked, offended, a lump in his throat.

'Oh, I've just hated that thing,' Eddie laughed, but Richie wasn't laughing. 'Oh, wait, don't look at me like that. I didn't mean –'

'Whatever,' Richie muttered, and went to the door.

'Rich,' Eddie tried, but Richie had already started to march off down the corridor. Furious, Eddie rolled his eyes back into his skull and groaned, cursing himself, 'Good going, fuckwit.'

Notes for the Chapter:

Forever Young - Alphaville - 1984.

5. Addiction

Summary for the Chapter:

After hurting Richie's feelings, Eddie goes to apologise.

Eddie knocked at the Tozier door. For a moment, he convinced himself he heard no signs of life on the inside and considered leaving, embarrassed and annoyed with himself for so brazenly hurting Richie's feelings. He wanted to explain, needed to explain, though it wouldn't be easy. On the other side of the door, he heard padded footsteps, and then Richie answered.

'What do you want?'

'Hi,' Eddie said. 'Can I come in?'

Richie folded his arms. 'Why?'

'Please.'

His eyelids low, Richie opened the door wide enough for Eddie's access. Eddie didn't hesitate to climb the stairs and push into Richie's bedroom. There was the guitar again, on its stand. As Richie closed the door behind them, he said sarcastically, 'Sorry, I would have hidden it away if I'd known you were still coming over. Wouldn't want you to have to look at it.'

'Rich, stop,' Eddie pleaded, turning to face him. 'I'm sorry. I don't hate your guitar.'

'That is literally the opposite of what you said yesterday.'

Eddie screwed up his face. 'I didn't mean it like that. It came out wrong.'

'You still said it,' Richie snapped. He sighed, 'It's the first thing I've been able to really focus on. The first thing I've been able to still fucking enjoy learning after the novelty's worn off. I thought I was getting pretty good at it, too.'

‘You are good at it, Rich,’ Eddie assured. ‘You’re really good at it.’

Richie extended his arms dramatically, ‘So you just hate the guitar as an instrument? You’re bored of hearing me play? What?’

Eddie stumbled, ‘No, no, I love the guitar. I love hearing you play. And yesterday, fuck, I really loved that.’

‘I did too,’ Richie droned, exasperated. ‘So what the fuck did you mean?’

Squirming, Eddie cast his gaze downwards. ‘It’s stupid.’

‘My guitar is stupid?’ Richie spat.

‘Fuck, no!’ Eddie raised his head and locked his eyes desperately, not wanting to create another misunderstanding. He corrected, ‘My reason is stupid. I’ve been stupid.’

Richie grumbled, ‘You can be a fucking idiot sometimes.’

‘Yeah, I can,’ Eddie agreed. ‘I shouldn’t have said anything; it just slipped out and it’s not even an issue anymore which is why it slipped out. And it’s not even your issue, it was never your issue, it’s mine.’

Narrowing his eyes, Richie said, ‘Go on.’

Eddie struggled, pinkness blotching across his cheeks and up his neck, hideously embarrassed. ‘You know the other week, when I came by and accidentally heard your song?’

‘Yes,’ Richie hissed, going pink himself at the reminder.

‘The reason I was there was because I was pissed at you for not coming to lunch again, because I fucking missed you, and I blamed the guitar. It was taking up so much of your time and that was time you used to spend with me.’

Richie twitched his nose. The part of him that was in love with Eddie twanged, but the part of him that loved the guitar insisted, ‘I’m not going to apologise.’

‘And you shouldn’t. I don’t want you to. It’s my fault.’

‘What is?’

Eddie puffed out his cheeks. ‘I was getting lazy. With our friendship, I mean. I was waiting for you to come to me and getting annoyed that you weren’t, because I’d come to expect it. I was taking you for granted.’

Richie cocked his head curiously. He’d never thought that about Eddie, that Eddie took him for granted. Perhaps that was because he’d never asked anything of Eddie. Richie had always been happy to love him and want him unconditionally, never expecting it in return, because it seemed so unreasonable to expect such a thing.

Besides, Richie was naturally a generous person when it came to his time, came to his friends; he wanted to give himself to them, for them to know that he loved them. He initiated because he wanted to initiate; usually there wasn’t a chance for the other person to offer.

Eddie went on, ‘So, I kept thinking of your guitar like an addiction, and I let it push me away rather than trying to find a way to share it with you, or even just trying to spend more time with you some other way. It was easier to resent it than to admit I was the problem, and that’s really fucking shitty of me.’

‘That is fucking shitty of you,’ Richie concurred.

‘I’m really sorry,’ Eddie said, ‘For all of it.’

‘It’s okay,’ Richie said, shuffling, unsure how to receive an apology he’d been so unprepared for, an apology for a slight he’d not known had been made against him.

‘I think you don’t realise how,’ Eddie breathed, ‘intense your attention actually is, which, to be clear, is a good thing. Fuck, it’s an amazing thing. And I’m not surprised you don’t realise, because I didn’t notice until it wasn’t on me anymore.’

Richie stepped closer to him. ‘But I don’t understand. As of last week, you specifically asked me to give you less attention.’

‘Yeah, because all of a sudden I had it back and I didn’t know how to cope with it. I was aware of it, and I’ve never been aware of it before. And I was already overthinking,’ he waved his finger back and forth between them, *‘this*, and I felt like I didn’t have any fucking control over it.’

‘You can’t have control over everything,’ Richie said, thinking about just how many times he’d wished he could rein the way he felt about Eddie, how many times he’d tried to squash it in his mind, how much dissection he had done, hoping that eventually the pieces would be small enough that they could dissolve into the nothing.

‘But you know what I’m like.’ Eddie raked a hand through his hair. ‘And if Friday last week proved anything, I was still completely out of control, if not worse, and this week,’ he groaned, ‘this week has been fucking unbearable. I’ve hated it. I’m all over the place.’

Richie licked his lower lip. ‘Why?’

‘Because I’m even more aware of it,’ Eddie whined breathily. ‘When we’re in the same space, I can’t concentrate on anything else. I’m just sat there thinking: *Look at me. Talk to me. Make a fucking joke. Anything.*’

Smiling, Richie slaked his tongue over his teeth, ‘I want to do all those things. I always want to do those things.’ He chuckled, ‘And believe me, I’ve been where you are. Before,’ he waved his finger back and forth between them, *‘this*, that was every day, just counting how many times you looked at me.’

‘I don’t know how you managed it,’ Eddie huffed.

Richie smacked his lips together, stepping right in front of Eddie. ‘I got a guitar.’ He smiled all too knowingly, and they both felt the atmosphere in the room shift.

‘I’m not buying a guitar,’ Eddie said, clenching his jaw, hands twitching to slide around Richie’s waist.

Biting his lip, Richie stepped forwards so that Eddie was forced to take steps back. ‘If you want me to do those things, Eds, all you have

to do is tell me. I'll do whatever you want.'

It was that guttural voice which Eddie had heard after he and Richie had kissed on his bed. His knees weakened as he jolted up against Richie's wall. 'Is that what you want?'

Richie slid his hand around Eddie's neck, and almost brought their lips together, but didn't. 'You know what I want,' he said, then slipped his mouth around to Eddie's ear. 'I want to know what you want.'

Eddie tripped over his words, shivering, 'I want –'

'You want all my attention on you again?' Richie asked, kissing down the tendon in Eddie's neck. 'Have I been making you jealous?'

The rush which coursed through Eddie was wild and charged, so much so that it almost scared him. He tried to wrap his arms around Richie, but Richie grabbed his wrists and held them down as he trekked kisses across Eddie's throat, suckling whenever Eddie dared to whimper.

'What do you want, Eds?' he susurrated into Eddie's other ear, then brought his face around to hover in front of Eddie's. He leaned, as though to kiss him, and snatched his lips away from Eddie's at the last moment with a snarl. 'You miss my teasing?'

Eddie lost it, murmuring, 'Fuck, Richie.'

Hearing Eddie say his name like that was all the encouragement Richie needed to finally press their lips together. He let Eddie's hands go and they hastily found the skin of his back, running underneath his shirt, clawing. Richie let his own hands push against Eddie's hips, fingers hooking through his belt loops.

As they each rasped an erratic breath, Eddie opened his eyes widely and asked, 'Where's this come from?'

For a moment, Richie's eyes softened and he asked gently, genuinely, 'Is it okay?'

That was a loaded question. Eddie was petrified, but only of how

badly he felt he needed Richie's lips on his own, how viscerally he responded to Richie's touch, how affecting his words were. The last thing he wanted to do was stop, but everything that he did want to do was mortifying to him.

He'd thought that kissing didn't matter, didn't mean anything, but Eddie had never felt anything like this before, and kissing was starting to not quite feel like enough. Not to mention the ache below his belt which he certainly knew was not supposed to be there, not when he was with his best friend, not even when he was kissing his best friend, because his best friend was *Richie*.

'Eds? Is it?'

Eddie didn't answer, just kissed him again, hard. With trembling fingers, he brought his hands around to Richie's lapels and tugged them backwards over his shoulders. Alarmed, Richie stopped kissing him long enough to watch as Eddie edged the sleeves off his arms and let his shirt drop to the floor. Unsatisfied, Eddie pulled at the cotton of Richie's undershirt until Richie recovered enough of his motor skills to help Eddie remove it. Swiftly, Eddie took off his own.

'Oh, fuck,' Richie purred as Eddie latched onto his newly exposed collarbone, pushing them away from the wall, stumbling precariously closer to the bed. As Richie's calves crashed against the mattress, he sat, only to have Eddie climb on top of him. 'Whoa,' he blurted, placing his palm softly to the side of Eddie's face.

Eddie didn't want to pause and catch up with himself. Reluctantly, he drew his head up to look at Richie's face. 'What?'

Richie's eyebrows steepled. 'Are you okay?'

'Yeah,' Eddie said quickly, 'You?'

'I don't know,' Richie said honestly.

Snapped out of whatever trance-like state he had been in, Eddie said, 'Oh.' Hastily, he unhooked his leg and twisted to sit beside Richie on the edge of the bed. 'Sorry. Too much?'

'No,' Richie spluttered. 'I've thought about doing that about a million

times.'

Eddie drew his knees up underneath his chin, growing self-conscious of his bare chest. 'Then what's wrong?'

'Well, you were acting like you've thought about doing that a million times too, and I know you haven't, so I guess,' he chuckled, 'I'm a bit confused. I was expecting you to need to go a little slower.'

'You were the one getting me all worked up,' Eddie scoffed, humiliated. 'Wasn't that the reaction you wanted?'

Richie blushed, 'I didn't expect to have that much of an effect on you. I was, I don't know, testing the water and then you just jumped in.'

Shrugging his shoulders up to his ears, Eddie hummed with displeasure. He thought about the quarry, how much harder it was to walk to the water's edge and dip his toes than it was to leap from the clifftop. 'Testing the water means I have time to think. If I think, I'll overthink, and if I overthink, I'll panic.'

'Right,' Richie sighed, picking at his fingernails.

'What?' Eddie probed, sensing that Richie was holding something back.

With a steadied look into Eddie's eyes, Richie said, 'I can't believe I'm saying this, because I want this and I want you so fucking much, but I'd really rather that you let yourself think. Maybe even overthink. And if you panic, just stop and talk to me.'

Eddie's eyes ran over Richie's chest, thinking about how he had been the one to tear the clothes from their bodies. He throbbed, blood driving southwards once more, and he winced. 'Those would not be fun conversations, Rich,' he said ominously.

'Maybe not,' Richie admitted, 'but I need you to know what you want.'

Furrowing his brow, Eddie blurted, 'I do know what I want.'

'Wait, what?' Richie stared at him.

Widening his own eyes as he realised what he had just said, Eddie brought his fingers to his temples and sat in a brutal moment of self-awareness, settling into it with an anxious sigh. After a moment, he let himself catch Richie's gaze to explain himself. 'When we're doing,' he hesitated, 'that stuff,' he scowled, hating his choice of words, 'I'm not trying to figure out what I want.'

'You're not?' Richie asked, retracting his feet from the floor and scooting backwards on the bedclothes.

Eddie shook his head slowly. 'I know what I want, but if I let myself think about the fact that I want it, then I panic, because what I want fucking scares me.'

Richie gulped. 'So, what *do* you want?'

Unable to find anything articulate to say, Eddie gestured towards where he had been straddled across Richie, and towards the wall where Richie had pinned him. 'That. I wanted all of that.' He swallowed, 'And then some.'

'Fuck,' was all Richie had in response.

'I find it really difficult to think about,' Eddie said, grimacing. 'But in the moment, I don't need to think, I just know. And I have the choice to stop and think and panic or,' he bit his lip, 'jump.'

'You want,' Richie started, then swiped across his brow. 'Oh, Christ.'

Eddie covered his eyes with his arms. 'Yeah. Fuck. And now I'm thinking about it and I'm freaking out again.'

Richie scrambled closer to Eddie. 'Hey, look at me.' When he didn't, Richie tentatively placed a hand on his shoulder, 'Eds, look at me. It's okay.'

Bringing his arms down emphatically, Eddie babbled, 'It's not okay. What am I doing? What are we doing? Fucking hell.'

'Eddie,' Richie tried again, softly, moving in front of Eddie. 'It's okay. Breathe.'

‘I can’t,’ Eddie gasped.

‘Yes, you can,’ Richie said, bringing his other hand to Eddie’s other shoulder.

Through his sharpening breaths, Eddie gathered himself enough to say, ‘I’m sorry, Richie.’

‘Don’t be fucking stupid,’ Richie scolded. ‘You don’t need to be sorry.’

‘Not sorry about that,’ Eddie said, referring to his attack, wringing his hands. ‘I’m sorry I kissed you. The first time. I shouldn’t have.’

Richie tried to retrospectively unhear this and failed. ‘Don’t say that. You don’t mean that. You want this.’

‘I do,’ Eddie whispered, ‘but –’

‘Fuck. Stop,’ Richie said. ‘No buts. Please.’

Eddie felt nauseous. ‘I can’t be like this, Richie.’

Trying to stop himself from tearing up, Richie begged, ‘Please just try and focus on your breathing. You’re still panicking and you’re letting it speak for you.’

‘Richie,’ Eddie choked.

And when you’re choking raggedly

I find it’s me that cannot breathe.

‘Look at me. Breathe with me. Try and breathe with me.’ Richie said, and slowed himself down, breathing audibly in through his nose and out through his mouth, watching the tremor in Eddie’s chest with pangs of guilt and sadness. He hadn’t seen Eddie have a panic attack in a long time, and he hated that Eddie might see him as its source.

Gradually, Eddie calmed himself back to breathing regularly. Once he did, the tears slipped down over his cheeks and he reached for Richie, grappling at his arms until their foreheads were resting together. Richie let himself cry too, bringing his palms to Eddie’s

cheeks.

‘Thank you,’ Eddie sobbed.

‘Jesus.’

Eddie blinked, ‘Fucking hell. I’m sorry.’

Richie’s jaw clenched, ‘Please don’t say it again.’

‘I’m not going to,’ Eddie said quietly.

Richie’s face contorted, ‘Did you mean it? Do you wish you could take that kiss back?’

Painfully, Eddie admitted, ‘Sometimes. When I get scared.’

‘What about the rest of the time?’ Richie asked, hope plaintive in his voice.

Eddie’s voice was so low it was near inaudible, almost percussive. ‘The rest of the time, I’m thinking about how much I just want to kiss you again.’

Richie needed to hear that. His heart crackled loudly in his chest. ‘Which one takes up more time?’

‘Fucking hell,’ Eddie sighed. ‘The second one, by far.’

‘Good,’ Richie said, relieved.

‘I don’t know if it’s good, Rich,’ Eddie said darkly. ‘You know I said I thought of your guitar like an addiction?’

Richie made a face, ‘Oh God. You don’t think of this like that. Please tell me that’s not how you see this.’

Eddie shrugged helplessly. ‘I want this. I shouldn’t want this. I’m trying to keep it a secret, trying to pretend that I don’t want it, trying to pretend it’s not a problem, trying to pretend that one more time won’t hurt, that I won’t let it slip any further, that I can make it through the day without it.’

Richie let Eddie go and groaned as he pressed his hands over his ears. 'Oh, God. Stop.'

Eddie didn't. 'And then I fucking seek it out. I can't stop thinking about it. Every time, I just fall into it so easily and I know I'm fucked. Every time I want a little more.'

'Eddie, I hate this,' Richie pleaded. 'This is really fucked up.'

With a heaving sigh, Eddie finished, 'And I know I'll come back again.'

Richie felt like he'd been punched. He felt violated, sick to his stomach. The tears came again. 'Is that really how you see me?' he blubbered.

The chambers in Eddie's heart collapsed in on themselves. 'Oh, fuck. No! No, God, no. That's not how I see you. Jesus, I'd never reduce you to that. That's not, fuck, that's not what I meant at all.'

'That's how it fucking sounds,' Richie's gut gurgled. 'So, what? Do you resent me? Like you resented my guitar?'

'No,' Eddie insisted, shifting so that he could put his hands on Richie's still bare arms. 'No. I don't resent you. That's fucking twisted. It's not about you. It's not really anything to do with you. You're my best friend. You're my favourite person in the fucking world.'

Richie wished that he'd heard Eddie say that under different circumstances. 'Then throw me a bone, here. Fucking explain.'

Eddie squeezed the flesh of Richie's shoulders. He packed emphasis onto his word that thudded out of his mouth. 'I really don't want to be gay, Richie.'

That was the first time one of them had used that word in front of the other in reference to what was happening between them, and it hung there in the bedroom like a great, red balloon.

'Kissing you,' Eddie said carefully, 'I keep trying to convince myself that it isn't much different to kissing a girl. You're just taller and you

smell different and your hands are bigger and your,' he trailed off. 'But it's nothing like it, and not even because of all those reasons.'

'Then why?' Richie asked quietly.

Resigned, Eddie said sadly, 'Because I *like* kissing you.'

Richie's brow furrowed. 'Are you saying that you don't like –' he started, but he didn't need to finish, because he could see it in Eddie's face. 'Whoa,' he said unhelpfully, as he tried to onboard this information.

'And I thought that,' Eddie almost laughed, but it was bleak and bitterly at the irony, 'the novelty might wear off. But every time I kiss you,' he braced, 'it feels so fucking *good*.'

Trembling, Richie let his hands graze along Eddie's arms. 'Yeah, it does,' he agreed. 'But to me, it also feels so fucking *right*.' His lower lip trembled, 'And I'm worried that you think it's wrong.'

Trying to hold himself back and failing, Eddie leaned closer to Richie. 'It doesn't *feel* wrong. But, it's like there are these voices in my head that tell me it is, and I don't know if they're mine.'

Richie leaned too, letting their noses brush. 'I used to think like that. I used to think it was wrong, that I was wrong.' He pressed his hand to Eddie's chest. 'But the way you make me feel, the way that I feel when I'm with you,' his voice cracked mercilessly, 'it's so fucking pure, Eds. I don't see how it can be wrong.'

They cried as their lips connected, each letting their arms slide around the other, holding, hauling them closer until Richie's back was flush against the duvet and Eddie lay sprawled across him. Richie kissed across Eddie's cheeks and on the tip of his nose, along the length of his jaw and in the centre of his forehead, which made Eddie smile even through the dregs of his tears.

Eddie dragged his hands down Richie's bare chest and soon his lips dared to follow, traipsing down Richie's throat and then his sternum, along the line of his collarbone and over his shoulders, then dotting across his chest and over his racing heart.

When Eddie brought his face back up to hover above Richie's, the tracks had stained down his face, his cheeks were pink and flushed, his eyes were red and sheening. Richie was much the same, completely wrecked and overwhelmed by such a rollercoaster of a day. He swiped at the tear tracks under Eddie's eyes, just as Eddie had done for him before they kissed for the very first time.

'You were right,' Eddie said, pressing his lips to Richie's.

'Probably,' Richie joked. 'What about?'

'I need to let myself think. I need to talk. It's hard but,' he nodded, 'this is better. I feel better.' He laughed, 'Which sounds stupid to say because I probably look like total shit.'

'You do,' Richie affirmed. He stroked his hands soothingly down Eddie's bare back. 'I feel better too.'

'I'm sorry for all the fucking shit I said though,' Eddie said, nuzzling into his neck. 'For making you feel like shit.'

Richie squeezed him, 'I know you didn't mean to. I know it's fucking hard to go through.'

Eddie squeezed him back. 'I don't know how you've been doing it alone. I wish,' he sniffed, 'I wish you felt you could have talked to me at the beginning. I get why you didn't, but I still wish I'd been there for you.'

'You were there for me,' Richie said. 'You didn't know why I needed you, but when I did, you were always there anyway.' He craned to kiss Eddie's forehead. 'And you're here now.'

After kissing him once more, Eddie said, 'Yeah. Yeah, I am.'

6. Codeword

Summary for the Chapter:

Eddie and Richie decide how they're going to behave around the rest of the Losers going forwards.

On Monday morning, Richie turned up at Eddie's to cycle to school. 'Hey, you,' he greeted as Eddie came out of the front door.

'Hey,' Eddie smiled, hopping over the steps to get to his bike. They started to ride.

'So,' Richie said, extending the vowel, 'we never actually agreed how we're playing it from here on out. Around everyone else, I mean. We got a little distracted.'

'You mean with all the shirtless panic attacks and crying?' Eddie summarised, laughing.

Richie laughed too, 'Yeah. I'm so lucky.'

'I think,' Eddie sighed, 'a little bit of normal would go a long fucking way right now.'

'Is that you verbally signing the permission slip?' Richie asked, cocking an eyebrow. 'You reinstating me?'

Eddie shook his head, 'Apparently. Must have lost my fucking mind. I'm actually asking you to rip the shit out of me.'

'And your mom,' Richie added.

Pondering a second, Eddie asked, 'Can I put a condition in your contract?'

'Depends what it is.'

'Well,' Eddie said, 'I know that you're going to really fucking annoy me, because that's one of your absolute favourite things to do, and I know you're going to make jokes about,' he searched for the words,

‘what we do together.’

‘With almost one hundred percent certainty, yes,’ Richie confirmed.

‘In that case, at some point, you’re inevitably going to say something which makes me want to either kiss you or kill you. So, I’m going to need a codeword, or something.’

‘A codeword?’ Richie grinned. ‘You’ve already got one. Beep-beep.’

‘Yeah, that’s the code for “shut the fuck up before I rescind all your kissing privileges”. I’m going to need another code for “we need to go somewhere alone as soon as possible so that I can exploit all aforementioned privileges”.’

Richie’s grin only got wider. ‘Well, well, well. I’m sure we can think of something.’

‘Needs to be something I can say in most contexts,’ Eddie mused. “‘Fuck off” springs to mind.’

Snickering, Richie suggested, ‘As in, “we’re gonna fuck off together”?’

‘Yeah,’ Eddie laughed.

They arced into the school grounds and went to chain their bikes. When they were bent low to the locks, Richie asked quietly, ‘So, what does “Fuck you” mean?’ Richie winked at him.

Eddie went scarlet, ‘Oh, I feel like I’m going to regret this already.’

‘Can I use the codewords?’ Richie asked suddenly.

‘There’s no fucking way I’d let you beep-beep me,’ Eddie scoffed, rolling his eyes and walking away.

With a smirk, Richie trotted to catch him up, draping his arm over Eddie’s shoulder. ‘What about the other one?’

Happily, Eddie sank into the hold, ‘I don’t know. Feel like you might abuse it.’

‘Excuse me,’ Richie feigned offence, putting his hand to his heart. ‘I have a much better track record of controlling myself than you fucking do.’

Eddie’s jaw dropped, ‘Oh, fuck you, Richie.’

‘What did that mean again?’ Richie asked, hooking his elbow tighter around Eddie’s neck and ruffling his hair.

Quickly, Eddie escaped and shoved him, grinning, then went to his locker.

Stan wandered over, ‘Christ, you two are in a good mood.’

‘It’s going to be an easier week,’ Eddie said, glancing at Richie, who smirked.

‘You mean now that our fucking chemistry project’s done?’ Stan asked. ‘Because I feel that.’

Richie asked, ‘Is it, Eds? Is your chemistry over?’

‘Yes,’ Eddie said carefully, worrying where Richie might go.

Pouting, Richie said, ‘But I thought you two were having such a good time doing it together.’

‘Real mature, Richie,’ Stan said, rolling his eyes.

‘Maybe you should’ve been doing it with me, Eds. I’m great at chemistry.’ As Eddie eyed him, pinkness in his cheeks, Richie added, ‘Just ask your mom.’

Eddie groaned, ‘Don’t make me beep-beep you.’

While Richie smirked at the insinuation, Stan’s eyes widened delightedly, ‘Is that back? Can we beep-beep you again? Please, God, say we can.’

‘No, no. That,’ Richie pretended to search for the right word, ‘privilege is reserved for Eddie and Eddie only.’

Stan laughed, 'Who do you have to fuck around here to get that privilege?'

'Me, obviously,' Richie snorted, and Eddie choked. 'Up for it, Staniel?'

'Beep-beep, Richie,' Stan grumbled.

'Nice try,' Richie rebuked. 'So, I noticed that wasn't a no.'

Stan lowered his eyelids, 'No.'

'Well, I have other privileges on offer, if you're interested,' Richie grinned, flashing his eyes at Eddie, who was now standing behind Stan so that he could pull faces without Stan's knowing.

'Hard pass,' Stan dismissed, and walked away.

Eddie hissed, 'You're not supposed to *try* and get me to beep-beep you.'

Chuckling darkly, Richie countered, 'Oh, I'm not trying to get you to beep-beep me, Eddie.'

'You are unbelievable,' Eddie shook his head, a quiver of excitement rippling through him.

'Why, thank you,' Richie said smugly.

Richie quickly realised that being told to fuck off was something he would truly have to earn. He and Eddie were back to ribbing on each other at every opportunity, bickering, teasing and insulting, occasionally touching.

He'd garnered a few beep-beeps for some choice jokes which were close to the mark, but the other Losers hardly seemed phased by the content, focusing only on the welcome resurfacing of the nostalgic

codeword and their irritation that Richie would only heed it from Eddie.

‘Why do you only shut up when Eddie says it?’ Bev complained. ‘I feel like my Loser rights are being violated.’

‘I owe it to him,’ Richie said indignantly. ‘He has to have something to shout through the walls when I’m fucking his mom.’

‘You are such an asshole,’ Eddie muttered.

Richie tried his best to work Eddie into a frenzy, but nothing appeared to work so well as when he had ignored Eddie completely. He debated treading the same ground once more, but decided against it, partly because opting to not make the jokes which fired in his head was incredibly difficult, but mostly because he saw it as a challenge from Eddie, a game, and he wanted to win.

Eddie viewed things much the same way. Once he saw how hard Richie was trying to get under his skin, the more determined he grew to resist his tricks. It became fun for Eddie to see Richie get frustrated and yearning, but at the same time, he was always on the verge of frightened that the next joke Richie made might be one which blew the whole gaffe. He watched as Richie danced around, toeing closer and closer to the line, desperate not to step over to the other side.

One lunchtime, Richie slid into the cafeteria table opposite Eddie, staring him down like the matador before the bull. There was a mischievous glint in his eye and Eddie swallowed down a bite of his sandwich with giddy dread.

‘I’ve started writing my own music,’ Richie announced to the table, and Eddie immediately froze.

Mike raised his head, ‘Really? That’s awesome.’

‘Just m-music or m-m-music and lyrics?’ Bill asked, ever the wordsmith.

Richie nodded, ‘Music and lyrics.’

Bill was intrigued, ‘What do you write about?’

With a smile, Richie looked at Eddie, 'I write about us.' He watched as the tips of Eddie's ears reddened.

'Can we hear some?' Ben asked.

Richie seethed, 'I'm not sure you're ready for it. Think it would have a pretty profound effect on you all. Could change everything.'

Eddie tried to keep eating normally, but subconsciously picked up his pace, not chewing properly.

Mike recalled, 'I thought you couldn't sing and play at the same time.'

'I can,' Richie blinked steadily. 'One of my many, many secrets.'

There wasn't enough water in Eddie's glass to keep his mouth from drying out.

Stan scoffed, 'You don't have any secrets. You're constantly talking; you'd never be able to keep a secret.'

'Smoke and mirrors,' Richie said, taking a bite off the end of his fork. 'You'd be surprised what I'm capable of hiding.' Idly, he toyed with the utensil in his hand, but Eddie noticed that it was waving in his general direction. 'Even hiding in plain sight.'

'Why, what else are you hiding?' Bev challenged.

Under the guise of an itch, Richie pulled back his collar just far enough that only Eddie could catch a glimpse of a purplish bruise, a bruise which Eddie had inadvertently left there only a few days earlier. 'Who knows?'

Stan squinted, 'Translation: nothing.'

'Oh, it's not nothing.' Richie quoted, then he reached over to steal one of Eddie's crisps. 'I don't see how it could be.'

Eddie slapped his hand away and conceded, 'Fuck off.'

Richie sighed with sweet joy, 'Maybe I fucking will.' He slid out of

the bench, kicking Eddie in the process and glancing at the floor. 'I'll see you guys later. Going to squeeze in a quick session at the music block.' Then he was gone.

For a moment, Eddie wondered what his own exit strategy should be, but then he spotted Richie's jacket discarded on the floor. Swiftly, he grabbed it and said, 'Moron left his fucking jacket.'

Bev held out her hand, 'Want me to hang onto it?'

'Nah, I'll just go give it to him,' Eddie dismissed, and left. As he turned the corner of the corridor, Richie came into view, leaning up against a bookshelf. 'Christ alive,' Eddie laughed as he threw the jacket at him, which Richie dropped. 'Butterfingers.'

They started to walk together down to the music block; Richie was grinning from ear to ear. When they stepped into the room, Richie gripped Eddie's waist. 'Honestly, Eds, it's about fucking time. I was running out of ideas.'

Eddie snorted, 'Well, I couldn't make it too easy for you. You're arrogant enough as it stands without thinking I'm wrapped around your little finger.'

'Aren't you?' Richie teased, kissing into the hollow below Eddie's ear.

'No,' Eddie smirked, easing himself closer so that Richie backed up against the wall. 'You're wrapped around mine.'

Richie tugged lightly at Eddie's earlobe. 'Don't flatter yourself, Spaghetti.'

'I don't need to.' Eddie said, sliding his hand over Richie's collar, over the place where he knew the shirt concealed a hickey. 'I have you to do that for me.'

Pouting, Richie tipped Eddie's chin with his index finger, 'Have I been too nice to you?'

'No, you could still be nicer,' Eddie purred, pushing his body up against Richie's.

‘How’s that?’ Richie asked, letting his hands slip further around Eddie’s waist so that they wrapped all the way around him, fingers spreading over the small of his back.

Eddie drew his hand to cup Richie’s cheek and dragged his thumb over Richie’s lower lip. ‘You could shut the fuck up and ki-’ he started but was cut off as Richie’s mouth met his own.

‘Better?’ Richie asked, then pressed another kiss to his lips.

‘Yes,’ Eddie grinned.

Softly, Richie kissed his cheek, then rested their foreheads together. ‘You do seem better. Than last weekend, I mean.’

Eddie hummed, ‘I am better. Past few days, I’ve been doing a lot of thinking, and overthinking, and a little panicking from time to time.’ He sighed, ‘But I’ve come to the conclusion that I need to work this all out, one way or the other. I need the answers.’

Closing his eyes, Richie said, ‘Good. For you, I mean, not for me. I mean, it is good for me, but,’ he bit his lip to stop from talking.

Laughing quietly, Eddie clawed a hand through Richie’s hair, which made him reopen his eyes. ‘If there’s one thing I’ve fucking realised, it’s a hell of a lot easier to figure things out when I’m with you, when I stop focusing too much on everyone and everything else and focus on you and me.’

Richie kissed him. ‘I like the sound of that.’ Then he kissed him again, harder.

‘I’m really glad it’s you, Richie,’ Eddie said gently. ‘I don’t think I’ve said that before, but I am.’

Heart thrumming, Richie stored this sentence in his brain like a record into his vinyl collection, something he would play over and over again. ‘Why?’

‘I couldn’t do this if it was anyone else. You make me feel,’ he stopped.

‘Good?’ Richie attempted hopefully.

Exhaling heavily, Eddie corrected, ‘Safe.’

That was even better. ‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah,’ Eddie said. ‘You’ve always made me feel that way, since we were kids. You always made me feel like I was gonna be okay, like we were gonna be okay. I know you have my back, and you’d do pretty much anything to stop me from getting hurt.’ His throat seized, and his head dropped.

‘Eds?’ Richie asked quickly, concerned, then pressed his lips to Eddie’s forehead, round his temple. ‘What is it?’

Raising his head, Eddie groaned, ‘I know I’m done with all those fucking placebo medications my mom put me on, but I still think about them all the fucking time. I’m always washing my fucking hands and checking the allergy restrictions on food packets and,’ he smacked his lips, ‘I still have inhalers hidden around all over the place.’

‘There’s one in my bag,’ Richie admitted, screwing up his nose. ‘You gave it to me years ago. I know you don’t need it, but I still can’t throw the fucking thing away.’

Fondly, Eddie kissed him. ‘My point is, it’s all still fucking there. I still think I’m sick so much of the fucking time, or think I’m going to get sick, try and stop myself from getting sick.’

Richie frowned sadly. ‘That stuff doesn’t just go away, I guess.’

‘But it does,’ Eddie said softly. ‘Occasionally. When I’m with you. It’s like,’ he furrowed his brow quizzically, ‘I, sort of, forget. It’s not all the time, but I get these moments where I catch myself not caring where I used to, or only caring out of habit and not out of necessity.’

‘Really?’ Richie asked, genuinely surprised.

‘Even before I found out that my mom had been lying to me,’ Eddie stressed. ‘Do you remember, when we were little, we used to share a fucking ice cream cone?’

Richie nodded, breaking into a smile, 'Yeah, I remember.'

Eddie stared up at him, almost with awe, 'My brain just seems to make exceptions for you. Like the name Richie is some kind of,' he trailed off.

'Codeword,' Richie finished, laughing.

'Yeah,' Eddie agreed with a small chuckle, then his face steadied. Cryptically, his words thick with implication, he said, 'So, when it comes to those questions I have to answer, it really does help that it's you. It almost needs to be you.'

Richie hauled him closer and kissed him. 'Glad to hear it,' he said jovially, but he couldn't have meant it more.

'It's more than that though,' Eddie shuffled, licking his lips, his voice breathy. 'I want it to be you.' He kissed him, running his hands down Richie's chest, 'I really want it to be you, Richie.'

They kissed again. Richie felt hot and precarious, as these words trickled down through his body. He tried to escape Eddie's notice by letting his backside squish uncomfortably into the wall, only to find himself panicked as Eddie stepped closer. This moment was so wonderfully passionate and perfect, but he didn't know how Eddie would react if he realised what was happening below his belt.

He tried to force it away, tried to redirect the neurones in his brain, but the only thing he could concentrate on was how soft Eddie's lips were against his own, how readily Eddie found the bare skin underneath his shirt, how badly he wanted to remove their clothes and give himself to Eddie completely.

He decided that his best option was to try and rotate their positions, so that he was more in control. He tightened his grip around Eddie's waist and, with clumsy footwork, span them around, even raising Eddie's feet slightly from the floor. From there he arched his hips away, kept his feet further back, and feeling now that he could stand it, began to suckle at Eddie's neck.

'If you give me a fucking hickey, I better be able to hide it,' Eddie

warned, dragging his thumb across Richie's collarbone. 'Like the one I gave you.'

Richie almost felt lightheaded from the blood rushing south. 'Do you want one?' he asked between sharp, nipping bites.

'Well, I don't want you to stop whatever it is you're doing,' Eddie gasped, pulling at the hem of Richie's shirt to bring him closer, even as Richie tried to stay away.

'Uh, Eds, I,' Richie started awkwardly, as his fly drew dangerously close to Eddie's. He stopped talking when Eddie rocked his hips against him, and he felt, without a shadow of a doubt, Eddie rivalling his own predicament. 'Oh, fuck, never mind,' he drawled, hungrily smashing their lips together.

Eddie stifled a whimper only to release it as a stuttered moan, and the adrenaline flooded his body with such intensity that he could swear he felt pins and needles in his fingers and toes. As he pulled on Richie's lower lip with his teeth, his knee hitched between Richie's thighs.

'Fucking hell, Eds, you're gonna kill me.'

'What are you doing at the weekend?' Eddie huffed, smiling.

Richie growled, 'This, I hope.'

Eddie checked, 'No shifts at the restaurant?'

'I'll call in sick. Hell, I'll fucking quit.'

'Rich,' Eddie scolded.

Richie sighed, 'Fine. I'll see if I can move some things around. I want to see you.'

'Yeah, no shit,' Eddie laughed.

With a dreamy hum, Richie kissed him softly. 'I think I like it when you're focusing on me.'

Eddie brushed their noses together. 'Think it's only fair. After I've asked for all your attention to be on me too.'

'Doubt I could ever take it off you now,' Richie commented. 'Even if I tried.'

He grinned, 'Don't.'

7. Snack

Summary for the Chapter:

Eddie and Richie are settling into a rhythm. Richie wonders whether Eddie likes him back, or if he still doesn't know.

Richie and Eddie were down in Richie's basement playing video games. Eddie was cross-legged in an over-sized beanbag chair, whilst Richie sat with his head hanging upside down over the lip of the sofa, gangly legs stretched up its back.

'I'm getting kinda hungry,' Eddie said, stomach growling.

'Don't blame your losses on your stomach, Kaspbrak,' Richie teased.

Eddie rolled his eyes, 'I beat you in the last game.'

'You're living in the past.'

Pressing pause, Eddie put his controller down and stretched his legs. 'I'm gonna get a snack. You want anything?'

'You're a snack. Can I have you?' Richie joked, batting his eyelashes.

'That is foul,' Eddie laughed, standing up. 'Never call me that again.'

'I'm sorry but I just can't promise that.' Richie readjusted to sit up straight. The world turned on its head. 'On a serious note, I would love some Cheetos.'

Eddie scowled, 'Do you know how many fucking additives are in those things?'

'Yeah, because you've told me sixty million times. They're delicious fucking additives.'

'Fine, I'll get them,' Eddie said, and without thinking, stooped slightly to kiss Richie's cheek before he stepped over his feet.

The gesture made Richie's heart flutter. It was the little intimate moments which Richie found himself analysing most, the moments which suggested that Eddie might think of them as an 'us' after all, that Eddie might reciprocate his feelings.

It was one thing that Eddie wanted to kiss him, enjoyed kissing him, and clearly, Richie was attractive to Eddie at least in some way, because of what had happened in the music room the other day, but it never left Richie's mind that those things weren't enough to believe that Eddie actually liked him as more than a friend, and he was terrified to ask.

Eddie left the room, feeling a small thrill from having kissed Richie inside the Tozier house outside the confines of Richie's bedroom. He didn't know why it made such a difference, but it did. He was smiling absentmindedly as he reached for the Cheetos in the cupboard. Then he went to the fridge and started to make himself a sandwich.

He was in a great mood. The day had felt more like a normal day, and those had been few and far between of late. Part of him had worried that he and Richie wouldn't be able to hang out together, alone, without the burden of heavy personal questions and intolerable sexual tension constantly muddying the atmosphere, but it seemed that they still could.

They'd chatted about Eddie's plans for college and Richie's awful job, Bill's new rust-bucket of a car and the fact that Stan was now on the baseball team, and that Mike was almost singlehandedly running the farm while Ben had picked up a carpentry apprenticeship, and that Bev was wearing clothes which she'd made herself which were actually not half bad.

They'd played video games, they'd exchanged old comic books, they'd listened to a couple of new records. It was easy, it was fun, and yet there were flirtatious jokes and salacious comments peppered in here and there which Eddie thought should have bothered him, should have jarred him, but they didn't.

Maggie Tozier came into the kitchen as Eddie was making a sandwich. 'Oh, Eddie, let me make that for you,' she insisted, ruffling his hair. 'I'll bring it down.'

‘It’s okay, Maggie, I’m nearly done,’ Eddie said politely, smiling up at her. He loved Maggie; he thought she was one of the kindest people in the world. There had been many times through the years when he’d been in Richie’s house and wished that he could have a mother like her.

He knew that she and Richie didn’t always get along, and never quite understood what it was that stood between them, other than the fact she was sensitive to his cursing and didn’t like his taste in music. His heart grew cold as he stood there and remembered a vague conversation he’d shared with Richie years ago, when he’d explained his mother’s reasoning.

‘She considers it blasphemous,’ Richie had laughed. ‘Thinks that rock stars all worship the devil.’

Eddie looked at the cross dangling around her neck and swallowed. Then he picked up the sandwich and the Cheetos. ‘Let me know if you need help with dinner,’ he offered. Maggie liked to cook with Eddie; she was often on diets and she relished picking the knowledge stored in Eddie’s brain.

‘That’s alright, Eddie, but thank you,’ Maggie said. ‘Oh, would you mind asking Richie what’s happened to the laundry basket? I left it on the washer but it’s not there anymore. Think he might have moved it.’

‘Sure,’ Eddie said, and went back downstairs. He threw the bag of crisps at Richie, who failed to catch them, and Eddie laughed, ‘Butterfingers.’ Then he sat down on the sofa beside Richie, leaning on the arm rest, putting his feet up on the cushions. ‘Your mom asked about the laundry basket.’

Richie popped open the bag, and the cheesy aroma diffused into the air around them. ‘Oh, right,’ he muttered, then called loudly enough that Maggie could hear, ‘Laundry’s on the line, mom! I put the basket back upstairs!’

Stopping eating for a moment, Eddie stared at him.

‘What?’ Richie asked, seeing Eddie’s expression.

‘You actually started doing the laundry?’ Eddie chuckled in disbelief.

Richie shrugged, ‘Yeah. Told you I would, didn’t I?’

‘Yeah, you did, but I didn’t think you’d actually do it.’

Smiling, Richie repeated himself, ‘The things I’d do for you, eh? Don’t test me, Spaghetti.’

‘Maybe I should,’ Eddie said. ‘Could be getting you to do my laundry too.’

Richie shrugged, ‘Not the worst idea. Would stop your mom nearly catching me in your bedroom.’

‘Stop you from having to climb out the window too,’ Eddie noted, finishing his sandwich.

‘Another thing I did for you,’ Richie smirked, putting the crisps down and licking the orange dust from each of his fingers.

Eddie reminded, ‘You wouldn’t have had to climb out if you hadn’t climbed in.’

‘I would happily do it again,’ he winked, pulling at Eddie’s ankles so that his legs extended. ‘And don’t pretend you didn’t like having me there. You asked me to stay, after all.’

‘So you didn’t break your fucking neck,’ Eddie insisted.

‘Desperate to get me into bed,’ Richie teased, climbing on top of him.

Scoffing, Eddie repeated, ‘Desperate? I’ve never been desperate. You’re the one who wrote a fucking song.’

‘Never been desperate?’ Richie hummed, locking Eddie’s gaze. ‘I think I have some evidence to the contrary.’ In a mocking, whining voice that was passably similar to Eddie’s, he leaned in and quoted, ‘Look at me. Talk to me. Make a fucking joke. Anything.’

Eddie’s jaw dropped. ‘How the fuck do you remember literally everything I say?’

He grinned, letting his eyes drop to Eddie's lips, 'Hang on every word that comes out of your mouth, Eds.'

'You must have a fucking Dictaphone in your pocket or something,' Eddie said, bringing his hands to Richie's hips.

'Or am I just happy to see you?' Richie laughed, and kissed him.

'You're always happy to see me,' Eddie said.

Richie conceded, 'Yeah. Sorry. Can't help it.'

Eddie stared up at him, thinking about how it was possible that he could have ever missed the look in Richie's eyes: that hopeless, melancholic, genuine affection. Maybe he had ignored it, maybe he had been blind, or maybe he'd just never known what that look was, since it had always been there.

Feeling like the earth ground to a halt, Eddie considered and reconsidered the thought he'd just had. Always? Surely that look couldn't have always been there. At some point it had to have shifted from one thing to the other. After all, Richie and Eddie had known each other for nearly a decade.

'What's that face for?' Richie asked, recoiling slightly.

Eddie's eyebrows knitted and he blurted, 'How long have you liked me?'

Richie croaked out a string of nonsense filler. He knew this question had been coming, was inevitable, but that didn't mean he was prepared for it; he'd just been stewing in quiet dread. Not wanting to answer, he did the same thing he always did when coherent sentences failed him. He swore. Gratuitously.

'It's been a while, hasn't it?' Eddie asked suspiciously, once Richie stopped cursing.

With a sigh, Richie admitted, 'Maybe.'

Eddie swallowed, 'How long?'

‘Six inches?’ Richie tried, but Eddie clearly wasn’t going to let it phase him. He climbed off Eddie and slumped into the corner of the couch. ‘Oh, come on, Eds, don’t do this to me.’

‘I don’t mind, Rich,’ Eddie assured, if not confidently, as he propped himself up. ‘I just want to know.’

Richie picked at his fingernails. ‘No, you don’t.’

‘A year?’ Eddie guessed.

‘Oh, can we really not do this?’ Richie pleaded. ‘I like you. It’s been a while. Let’s just leave it at that.’

Eddie flattened his lips. ‘More than a year, then. Two?’

Richie clambered back over to press his hand over Eddie’s mouth. ‘Stop guessing.’

‘More than two?’ Eddie mumbled, muffled through Richie’s fingers. As an increasingly frantic Richie let go, Eddie asked, ‘Well, I fucking hope it’s not before we started high school, because that’s when I started buying my own fucking clothes.’

Snorting in an attempt to let Eddie believe that was the extent of it, Richie said, ‘Yeah, like I’d have a thing for your red short shorts and fanny pack.’

Eddie bolted upright and slapped his arm, ‘Oh my God. You had a thing for my red short shorts and fanny pack?’

‘I just said I didn’t!’ Richie denied.

‘Yeah, and you’re fucking lying,’ Eddie snapped. ‘Fucking hell, Richie.’

Richie took off his glasses to rub his eyes with the rough balls of his fingertips. ‘I did not want to have this conversation.’

Eddie wasn’t listening to him. He was thinking, his mind reeling, reliving years of history together, totting further and further back. ‘That summer. *That* summer, Rich.’

‘What about that summer?’ Richie squeaked.

Craning his chin away from Richie in preparation for the answer he feared, Eddie asked, ‘Before or after?’

Trilling his lips, Richie revealed, ‘Before.’

Eddie locked his hands behind his head and tried to process this. ‘Jesus Christ.’ They were silent for a moment, then he asked quickly, ‘Did you know that’s what it was, though? Or have you put it together retrospectively?’

Richie was so glad that he couldn’t see Eddie’s face properly, blurred and warped as he hoped this conversation would become as the years went by, fogged in distant memory. ‘I knew. By that summer, I knew.’

‘That’s almost six years, Richie.’

‘Yeah, I know. I can count,’ Richie replied defensively.

Six years. It was such a long time that it hardly seemed to have meaning to Eddie. A third of his life. Two thirds of the time he’d known Richie. How old he was when he went to his father’s funeral. How old he was when he met Bill. How old Georgie was when he died. Almost same amount of time he’d known Bev, Ben and Mike. The same amount of time he’d been without his medication. Longer than it had been since he’d seen that clown in the sewers. Longer than that clown had been in his nightmares.

‘Okay,’ Eddie said eventually.

‘Okay?’ Richie repeated incredulously. ‘It’s fucking weird as shit, Eddie, and you’re allowed to say so.’

Eddie blinked rapidly, ‘All this time and you never told me? You were never going to tell me. I found out by accident.’

‘Of course I never told you; I was fucking terrified,’ Richie rambled. ‘I’m twelve years old and falling in love for the first time, which is scary enough, and I’m learning painfully quickly that I’m not supposed to fall in love with another boy, let alone my best friend, and I’m being fucking chased, insulted and threatened by Henry

Bowers on the daily, watching my Catholic parents pore over a fucking Bible right in the middle of the fucking AIDS crisis and then, lo and behold, I've got a murderous demon sewer clown on my ass about it as well. That's enough to shut you up and fuck you up for a lifetime.'

Cold, Eddie stumbled, 'IT used it against you?'

'IT used *you* against me too,' Richie said, trying not to remember too vividly the apparitions of Eddie which he'd encountered in the Neibolt house.

Eddie leapt to throw his arms around him, almost shaking as he thought about how scarring that must have been, and how hard it must have been to not be able to share with the other Losers, to have to pretend that he was okay, that there was nothing he feared more than clowns themselves.

'I'm so sorry, Richie,' Eddie snivelled. 'I can't even fucking imagine.'

Richie was grateful for Eddie's arms tight around his body and let himself hold Eddie in return. 'Yeah, it wasn't exactly fun.'

Only squeezing tighter, raising his leg over Richie's thighs to be astride him, Eddie stumbled, 'But you're fucking here. You're here with me. How? How've you done that?'

'Honestly, Eddie, I haven't had a choice.' He shrugged, 'I used to think it was something I could fix. I read about these places where you can go and they try and 'fix' you, but the more I read, the more it seemed like they were talking shit. I tried going back to church with my mom but it still didn't make any fucking sense to me. I tried pretending that it just didn't fucking matter how I felt, I just had to push it down and lie through my teeth. I've tried everything. Doesn't fucking work like that.'

Eddie pulled back to look at him, searching his eyes. There was something ancient and tired in them, like a sluggish leviathan lurking at the depths of the ocean.

'I've tried so fucking hard. There have been days when I've wanted to

get a knife and fucking cut it out of me.'

Though Eddie had always known that Richie contained a streak of melancholy, an optimistic nihilist, he didn't often hear him talk violently, not even towards himself. It hurt him to hear it, to think that Richie had felt so despairing.

Richie's lower lip trembled, 'But I can't. It's part of me; it's who I am and what I am. I can't change it any more than I can change what flavour ice cream I like or the colour of my eyes or the fact that I find it funny to joke about your mom.'

While his heart ached, Eddie's lips wormed into a feeble smile.

Finding one of Eddie's hands with his own, Richie laced their fingers together, 'And I've only really been able to get to this point, accepting it, because of you. Sometimes, loving you has felt like the only thing my heart's fucking good for.'

'It's not,' Eddie promised.

Richie stared at Eddie's chest with his blurred vision, the plain expanse of his t-shirt like a void that he could fall through. Quietly, he said, 'When I've been right at the bottom of the barrel, fucking hating myself, the way out was believing that I couldn't be such an insufferable piece of shit if you thought it was worth wasting your fucking time with me.'

Eddie cupped Richie's jaw and tilted his chin up to lock his eyes, drawing his own face closer so that he seared into clarity. 'You are an insufferable piece of shit sometimes,' Eddie smiled, 'but I haven't wasted any of my time with you, you idiot.'

'A compliment sandwiched between two insults,' Richie hummed. 'Sounds about right.'

'I've got to keep you on your toes,' Eddie said, and kissed the corner of his mouth.

Richie bit his lip, his hands roaming Eddie's back, unsure where to settle, where Eddie felt most real in his arms. 'You know how you said that I make you feel safe?'

The hairs on the back of Eddie's neck prickled, 'Yeah?'

'You're the only safe space I've ever fucking had.'

Eddie kissed him, beautifully, as though he could coax the trauma from deep inside Richie's gut, like a snake-charmer, and take it away. He wished he could take it away, but if he couldn't, then he would settle for Richie talking to him about it, now that he could finally be truly honest with him.

Richie felt that he could stay there forever, despite Eddie's weight cramping against his thighs, the dehydration drying his mouth, the whet appetite brewing in his stomach. He'd not spoken about what he'd been through with anyone before, and Eddie had made it so easy, so freeing, that part of him wondered how things might have been if he'd said something at the time, or at least, earlier. It didn't really matter; Eddie was here now, and he was listening, and that was all Richie had ever needed: to be heard.

'Any chance you're still hungry?' Richie asked.

Eddie backhanded Richie's arm, 'See? Those Cheetos are just fucking air and shitty chemicals.'

'I'm thinking pizza.'

'And a movie?' Eddie suggested, hopping off him.

Richie smiled, getting up to head upstairs. 'Sure. Think it's your turn to pick, so don't pick something fucking lame like you did last time.'

Screwing up his nose, Eddie said, 'How is *Rocky* lame?'

'You can't understand a word the guy fucking says and then he fucking loses at the end,' Richie cried, exasperated.

'How many times? You're missing the fucking point!'

They closed the basement door.

8. Impromptu

Summary for the Chapter:

Richie finds out that Eddie plays piano.

‘Jesus Christ, Richie!’ Eddie shrieked from inside the hammock. ‘Fuck off!’

Richie gripped him by the wrists and lifted him out. ‘Let’s.’ Then he started to pull Eddie towards the hatchway.

Bev exhaled a plume of smoke. ‘Where the fuck are you two going?’

‘Again,’ Stan added, nonchalantly turning a page in his book.

Richie was prepared, ‘If you must know, Eddie’s been helping me out with my song-writing.’

‘Are you p-playing?’ Bill asked, raising his eyebrows at Eddie.

‘You don’t play guitar, do you, Eddie?’ Mike checked curiously.

‘No,’ Eddie said, blushing, trying to leave.

Richie bragged, ‘He’s a singer though.’

Bill disclosed, ‘And he p-plays p-piano.’

‘You play piano?’ Ben asked, his eyes lighting up.

Bev stubbed out her cigarette, ‘Why don’t I know this?’

Eddie felt Richie’s eyes burning into the side of his head. ‘No, I,’ he started, ‘well, I haven’t played in a while. I was never any good.’

‘Liar,’ Stan said. ‘You were.’

Richie said, ‘Yes, Eddie is absolutely helping me via his piano prowess. He’s a prodigy. Speaking of which, I am going to listen to him play right fucking now.’ He jabbed a finger into Eddie’s ribcage, and he hastily climbed out of the clubhouse.

When they were a while away, Eddie turned to Richie and kissed him, then said, 'Just to be fucking clear, there is no way I'm playing the piano for you.'

'Do you really play?' Richie asked, fascinated. 'Is this something I've forgotten or something I never knew?'

He wasn't sure which he'd prefer it to be. It helped that some of the other Losers were in the same boat as he was, but it hurt that Bill and Stan knew when Richie didn't. He thought he knew everything there was to know about Eddie.

Eddie shrugged, 'Could be either. I don't talk about it.'

'Why not?'

'Frankly,' Eddie lowered his gaze, 'it's always made me kinda sad.'

Not sure if he should ask, the question stuttered out of Richie's mouth in three syllables. 'Why?'

'Piano's my dad's,' Eddie said quietly, starting to walk. 'I don't have many memories of him, but most of those I do have are at the piano. Him playing and me trying to sing, and my mom even fucking smiling, if you can believe.'

Richie furrowed his brow, 'Is there a piano in your house?'

Eddie nodded. 'It's a bit buried at the moment. Like I said, I don't play much anymore. And I never liked playing for an audience.'

'But when did you play it at all?'

Scratching the back of his neck, Eddie explained, 'After my dad died, I asked to learn to play. My mom was torn at first. She liked the idea of me learning an instrument; a bit of discipline and practice, keeping me inside and out of danger, you know, but she was worried it would make her too sad to hear it.'

'But you did learn.'

'Yeah. We already had the piano. Family friend offered to give me

lessons for free, and gave me some books to use, and I practised a lot. This is back in the days when my mom would barely let me leave the house at all, you remember? You kept asking her if I could come around for playdates and you thought I didn't like you because I never came.'

Richie chuckled, 'Yeah, and then I realised when I asked you myself that you'd never even known I'd called.'

'So, I learned. I quickly realised that it did make my mom sad, and it also kept her very, very quiet. She'd often have to leave the room. Then there were my aunts. You know, the ones who always used to pinch my cheeks?'

'You mean like this?' Richie reached over and squeezed Eddie's dimpled cheek, 'Cute, cute, cute!'

Eddie slapped him off, 'Yeah, those aunts. Well, I hated going up there, but they did have a decent piano. I'd play it for hours just wishing the time to go by. It was just,' he shrugged, 'a bit of an escape. From everything.'

'Then why did you stop?'

Chewing the inside of his cheek, Eddie said, 'I guess I stopped finding the time. Once I was a teenager, us Losers were hanging out almost every day after school and over the holidays, then schoolwork gets on top of you. Plus, since I broke my wrist, I get this weird ache shooting through my hand when I play too long.' He subconsciously rubbed along the tendons over his knuckles.

'I can't believe I didn't know this,' Richie shook his head.

'I can't think why I would have told you,' Eddie scrunched his nose. 'It's not exactly your kind of music that I'd play. It's all classical stuff.'

Richie twisted his lips, 'Still. Just thought I'd know that sort of thing. Especially now that I play too.'

Eddie rummaged in his pocket for his housekeys. 'Maybe it's because I knew you'd ask me to play and I don't want to.'

‘Please?’ Richie begged, hopping up and down as they crossed the threshold and closed the door. ‘Pretty please?’

‘I’ve already told you to fuck off,’ Eddie whispered, kissing along his jaw and up to the corner of his mouth. ‘Can’t we just go upstairs? My mom’s actually out of the fucking house for once.’

Richie kissed him, then opened his eyes, scanning through the archway of the living room to see if he could spot the mystery instrument.

‘Seriously?’ Eddie scoffed. ‘You’d rather hear me play the piano than go upstairs with me? Christ, I must be losing my fucking touch.’

He grinned, ‘Never. I’m just curious. I played for you, didn’t I?’

‘But you like playing for people,’ Eddie reminded.

Richie put his hands together, pleading, as though in prayer.

If you wondered what I stayed for

It’s the same thing each night I’ve prayed for.

‘If I play you one song, will you let it go?’

Richie promised, ‘You can do whatever you want with me.’

‘Kill you, probably,’ Eddie grumbled, and swanned into the living room, edging past a stack of newspapers his mother had yet to throw away, trying not to disturb the knickknacks cluttered on the mantelpiece.

It wasn’t often that Richie actually went into Eddie’s living room, he realised, since Sonia Kaspbrak so often occupied the great armchair in its centre, and they hardly had a positive relationship, despite his frequent jokes. He only really saw Eddie go in there to kiss his mother goodbye, and that had drastically dwindled over the years.

It was a long and narrow room, and the piece of furniture tucked in the corner at the far end, Richie understood for the first time to be an upright piano. It was draped in a faded, purplish-grey cloth,

presumably to protect it, and the cloth had been laden with books and papers, so that the gold feet and wooden frame were scarcely visible. There was a piano stool tucked underneath, which Eddie opened to reveal a secret store of sheet music and books.

‘You can have a look if you want,’ Eddie offered. ‘I’ll try and get all this shit off.’

‘That’s what your mom says right before we –’

‘Do you want to hear me play or not?’ Eddie sighed, and Richie nodded, miming zipping his lip.

As Eddie undressed the piano, Richie perused the music. Eddie was right that it was mostly classical pieces, and he wasn’t familiar with many of the composers. He’d learned chords and tablature while playing the guitar, but the staves and notes were unfamiliar to him. He wondered if Eddie would be able to teach him to read it.

Eddie opened the protective lid which concealed the eighty-eight black and white keys. He ran a finger along the octaves; there was no dust. ‘Anything you’d like to hear in particular?’

‘No,’ Richie said, not explaining that he barely recognised a single piece. ‘Anything you’d like to *play* in particular?’

Humming, Eddie reached for a stack of the sheets and started to rifle through. ‘The Carreño’s a good piece. Satie’s *Gymnopédie*: that’s pretty famous. You’d recognise that if you heard it. *Cristofori’s Dream*: that’s a bit more modern. Only came out a few years ago. Maybe *Claire de Lune*, or anything by Debussy; I like him.’

‘You said a whole bunch of shit I don’t know there,’ Richie admitted, captivated.

‘I like this one,’ Eddie said, sliding a sheet out from the middle of the pack and resting it on the stand. ‘It’s a Schubert. It’s hard, but I used to play it a lot so I should be able to remember it. Think the name is kind of fitting.’

‘What’s it called?’ Riche asked, dragging a chair over so that he could sit down.

Eddie chuckled, '*Impromptu*.'

'That is fitting,' Richie agreed.

'I'm only doing a bit of it: number three. That's my favourite part,' he gushed, then cleared his throat, embarrassed. He closed the piano stool and shunted it underneath himself and sat. Delicately, he poised his hands over the keys, but didn't quite touch them.

When he didn't move, Richie leaned on the edge of the piano, chin in his fists. 'You okay?'

Almost imperceptibly, Eddie nodded, and let his fingertips graze the ivories, sliding into the gaps between the ebonies.

'You don't have to, Eds,' Richie said abruptly, seeing the solemn expression on Eddie's face. He felt like he just watched him disappear into himself, and Eddie didn't do that very often.

Eddie didn't say anything, just let his eyes flick once to the music sheet above him, then started to play. The piece swept over him quickly, his fingers dancing with muscle memory, barely needing to glance back up at the quavers and crotchets marked on the page.

A sad nostalgia crept through him, and a loneliness. Loneliness: that's what it was. The piano had always made him feel that way; isolated even when he was surrounded by other people.

Surrounded by the ghosts of his parents in hazy memories, for it felt that his mother had died with his father in some ways. Surrounded by his extended family, all but ignoring the music as they bustled about cooking and small-talked into the night. Surrounded by the houses of the neighbouring families, kids running riot in the streets, kids he was so rarely allowed to join until Richie, Stan and Bill dragged him into the real world.

That was why he'd stopped playing, really. Once he knew how it felt to have real friends, to have the other Losers, to have a home in them where he couldn't find one with his mother, he never wanted to recreate that same lonely feeling; that protective, isolating shell.

Except, as he played now, the loneliness felt oddly misplaced,

because for the first time, he felt that someone was really listening, that somebody really wanted to listen, and that the music didn't make them want to leave, didn't remind them of something sad, wasn't just background noise in their life.

Richie's eyes flashed as they followed Eddie's hands, studied his concentrated expression, noticed that Eddie hardly even used the sheet music, so well-engrained. He was completely transfixed, immovable and yet so moved, like something inside him detached from his physical body entirely.

Shivers streaked down his spine, he found his breath irregular, rising and falling with each phrase, his eyelids instinctively closing at each glorious apex. Classical music had never done all that much for him before, but then he'd never heard it played by Eddie.

When the song ended, Eddie felt lighter, almost airy. It took him a second to settle himself, to gather the courage to look at Richie. As soon as he did, Richie leaned over and kissed him, climbing out of his chair to only get closer to Eddie, stooping down as Eddie still sat on the stool, pressing their lips together over and over.

'You're an asshole,' Richie said softly.

'Probably,' Eddie said. 'Why?'

Richie raised his finger, 'You couldn't let me have one thing that I can do better than you.'

Closing the piano lid and standing up, Eddie scoffed. 'It's not the same. I can't play one chord on the guitar. I wouldn't even know where to start.'

'You're really good, Eds,' Richie said honestly. 'I know it was just an ingenious ruse of mine earlier when I said you were helping me write, but it might not actually be a terrible idea.'

'Oh God, don't say it,' Eddie squeezed his eyes shut as he pushed past him.

Richie gasped, 'We should totally start a band.'

‘We are not starting a fucking band,’ Eddie laughed, skipping over his mother’s newspapers again to get back to the door. He jerked his head towards the stairs. ‘Now, come on. You promised.’

Smiling, Richie followed him to the bedroom. After suitably showering each other with kisses, they found themselves laying on Eddie’s bed, with Eddie’s fingers twisting through the curls of Richie’s hair.

‘I know I said I’d let it go,’ Richie said leadingly, ‘but I just wanted to say that if you didn’t hate playing for me then I’d really love to hear you play again.’

Eddie rolled his eyes. ‘I didn’t hate playing for you. Wasn’t it kind of awkward for you though, to have to sit there in silence?’

‘Not at all,’ Richie shook his head, dotting his lips up Eddie’s bare arm. ‘I was just sat there trying to comprehend how I’m now even more attracted to you than I was before. I just don’t understand how that’s possible and I don’t think it’s very fair of you to keep outdoing yourself.’

‘You’re such a sap,’ Eddie snickered.

Richie kissed him, ‘It’s true though. I’ve known you nearly ten years and there’s still so much I don’t know. I still can’t figure you out. Every time I think I have you sussed, you surprise me.’

‘I mean the same goes for you,’ Eddie confessed.

‘Yeah?’

Eddie nodded, ‘Yeah. These past couple of months have been nothing if not a fucking surprise.’

‘You’re telling me,’ Richie scoffed.

Smirking, Eddie went on, ‘And when I heard that song, you had a thousand outs that I know you could have taken, and you know you could have taken. You could have joked your way out of it. It could have been so easy for you to lie to me. But you didn’t. That was a fucking surprise.’

The corner of Richie's mouth twitched downwards. 'Yeah. Well, I don't like to lie to you. Think I just couldn't do it again.'

'And I'm so fucking glad you didn't,' Eddie breathed, clambering on top of him, running his hands down Richie's stomach. 'We wouldn't be here otherwise. We wouldn't have this.'

Richie so badly wanted to ask where here was, what this was, in Eddie's mind, but the words stifled in his throat as he stared at Eddie above him, where he'd dreamed that one day he would be. He didn't want to ruin that, ruin the moment, make Eddie climb off or leave. He knew he might have to ask at some point, but maybe Eddie would come to him in his own time, if Richie left him to it.

Eddie leaned down again to kiss him, squeezing the flesh around Richie's waist until Richie arched his back away from the bed, hauling himself to sit up straight. Richie's lips descended over Eddie's chin and down his windpipe, dragging against the skin. He kissed the hollows below Eddie's collarbone, nails pawing at Eddie's shoulders so that Eddie rocked his head back and grinded against him.

This was all Eddie had wanted all day. Bringing his hands down to Richie's hips, Eddie let his thumbs drag just below the waistband of Richie's jeans. 'Rich?'

'Yeah?' he grunted, leaving the third in a line of reddish bruises at the base of Eddie's neck.

Eddie let his palm push against the buckle of Richie's belt. Then his fingers found the loop in the leather, and he started to pull. As Richie's eyes snapped up to meet his, he asked, 'Is this okay?'

A thrill and chill shooting through him, Richie nodded, and brought his own hands around to Eddie's front, his thumb finding the button of Eddie's trousers. 'Is this?'

In response, Eddie kissed him hard, his trembling fingers fumbling to unloop Richie's belt and cast it away as Richie popped the button on his own lower half. They each found the other's fly and tugged the zippers down. Then Richie's hands hovered, hesitating, as he broke the kiss and glimpsed downwards at the unfolding scene.

Eddie noticed his reticence and brought his hands to Richie's cheeks, forcing his gaze. He whispered, 'I want this, Rich. I want you to.' He kissed him, then inhaled sharply as he felt Richie's hand slide into his trousers. His own hand trailed back down Richie's body, and when Richie showed no resistance, slipped lower than it ever had before.

'Fuck,' Richie cracked, locking his other hand around the back of Eddie's neck as Eddie touched him uncertainly.

'Yeah,' Eddie panted, sliding his hand back up only to burrow it beneath the waistband of Richie's boxers.

Copying, reaching into Eddie's briefs, Richie had to keep pressing his lips to Eddie's skin, fearing that if he didn't, he would say something that he would later regret. Still, as he had to rasp for air, stunted swears escaped his lips, mingled with Eddie's name.

'Fuck, shit, Eddie, I'm gonna –'

'Me too,' Eddie tremored, his eyes closing as the waves rippled through him.

Richie's eyes snapped open as the same flood crashed down inside him, and he watched every twitch and tension spark and release in Eddie's face as the pleasure tore from his core and toppled from his mouth in a guttural groan. It was like music to Richie's ears, and he cupped Eddie's face with the hope that he would open his eyes. He did, and Richie felt completely awash with love.

Eddie felt incredible, and terrified, because the reason he felt so incredible was the boy sat opposite him, the boy he was sat *on*. Flustered, flushed, he querulously kissed Richie's red lips, if only to have an excuse to shut his eyes again for a moment and block out the world.

When he broke away, he stuttered, 'There are tissues on the side.' He paused, then realised that Richie couldn't reach for them himself, since he was weighing him down, so he unhooked himself and crawled over the bedclothes. His fingers were still shaking, and he wasn't sure if it was the residual pleasure or his burgeoning fear, as he tugged the Kleenexes from the box, then lobbed the box at Richie,

who dropped it.

‘Butterfingers,’ Eddie mumbled, cleaning himself off, trying not to look at the mess, unsure which was his doing and which was Richie’s. He sat back against his headboard and leaned again for the antibacterial hand sanitiser in his bedside drawer, and once his hands were clean, he exhaled.

Richie moved to sit beside him, having cleared up as best he could, hastily threading his belt through the loops of his jeans. He knew that he should say something, but for what felt like the first time in his life, his motormouth had completely broken down.

They sat there, side by side, silent, eyes wide and both in shock, unsmiling, trying to process the incontrovertible barrier which had just been broken between them as their breathing slowed, as the blood diverted back to their brains.

Still not having the words, Richie simply dropped his hand and inched it towards Eddie’s, just grazing their little fingers together. Eddie’s eyelids fluttered, and he interwove his fingers with Richie’s. It was sufficient affection to steady Richie’s nerves, but Eddie felt himself shutting down, like an overworked computer inundated with data.

‘Eds?’ Richie started, finally finding his voice.

His voice was breathy, barely audible. ‘Yeah?’

Richie didn’t know what his question was. Eventually he asked, ‘Was that okay?’

Eddie’s throat constricted, ‘Yeah. That was,’ he swallowed, ‘good. You?’

Squeezing his hand, Richie agreed, ‘Yeah. Really good.’

‘I think I need a shower,’ Eddie said.

Richie wasn’t sure if this was a joke, so he didn’t laugh. Finally, he turned his head to look at him. ‘Eddie?’

He struggled, 'Yeah?'

Hearing the stiffness in his voice made Richie's heart splinter. 'It's okay,' he said gently. 'You're okay.'

Eddie shook his head, 'Fuck. I'm sorry. I don't know why I'm being so fucking weird.' He wiped his brow with the back of his hand and returned Richie's gaze, promising, 'I'm okay, really.'

'Okay, well, good,' Richie tried, shuffling closer to him.

Mimicking the movement, Eddie squeezed next to Richie, their clasped hands resting on Eddie's thigh. After another strained silence, Eddie apologised, 'I'm such a mess.'

'Who isn't?' Richie joked.

'I'll be less of a fucking dipshit next time,' Eddie laughed.

Richie snapped his head around. 'Next time?'

'Well, yeah,' Eddie said, as though it was obvious.

Spluttering, Richie said, 'Well, I mean, okay. Fuck,' he stared at him. 'Sorry, I just feel like we turned over two pages at once.'

Eddie made a face, 'Yeah. My brain's a bit all over the place.' It was skipping, like a record scratch, discordant fragments of thoughts scrambling together, jumping ahead before he had all the details, so it didn't make a lot of sense. 'Sorry.'

'That's okay,' Richie said, boggled. 'Are you okay?'

Trying to settle him, Eddie pressed his lips to Richie's cheek. 'I'm good,' he said, smiling. 'Really, Rich. That felt fucking good.'

'Yeah?' Richie asked, smiling gently. 'I thought so too.'

'Yeah?' Eddie asked back, strangely proud of himself. 'Cool.'

'Way better than your mom,' Richie encouraged.

Eddie wrenched his hand from Richie's grasp. 'Gross! For fuck's sake,

Richie,' he scolded, but it soon devolved into laughter.

Nobody made Eddie laugh quite like Richie could, like the laughter screamed out of his gut. Richie watched as Eddie's eyes creased at the corners, as the dimples appeared in his cheeks. He smiled at him, completely besotted, thinking: *I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.*

They joked and bickered idly as they put their clothes back on. Richie checked the time and decided to head off home. He kissed Eddie goodbye, and left.

Eddie went to take a shower, throwing all his clothes in the laundry basket on the way. As he sat under the steady stream of water, he started to think, and thinking soon descended into overthinking, which spiralled into panicking.

He was happy, he was really happy, giddy even, about the day's events. He adored spending time with Richie, couldn't wait to see him again, wanted a next time. But though everything was a secret, though he knew that it was contained, though he knew that the only person he needed to trust beyond himself was Richie, who he trusted with his life, his brain scratched back on the record which had skipped earlier. His brain scratched right back and played from the beginning, and to Eddie, there was only one lyric, looping again and again.

He said it once, aloud, to himself. Then he turned off the shower, dried off, and went to bed.

Notes for the Chapter:

Eddie's favourite piano pieces:

Theresa Carreno - Un Reve en Mer

Satie - Gymnopedie no.1

David Lanz - Cristofori's Dream

Debussy - Claire de Lune

Schubert - Impromptu Op.90 no.3

9. Alone

Summary for the Chapter:

Richie is struggling to figure out where he stands with Eddie.

Richie was giving himself an embolism trying to psychoanalyse Eddie. He knew it was his own fault, because he couldn't bring himself to ask the right questions, the direct questions, and kept trying to circumvent the problem by dropping hints and potential opportunities for Eddie to latch onto, which he never did.

For all intents and purposes, they acted like a couple, outside of the obvious caveat that they had to keep their liaison a secret from everyone else. Richie had thought and thought about what it was that made two people boyfriend and, well, boyfriend.

They spent time alone together, they made each other laugh, they talked constantly; but that was also true of them when they were friends. They kissed each other, aroused each other, and were intimate with each other; but that could also be true of two strangers on a first meeting.

It was the little things that made the difference. Like sharing parts of themselves that they'd never shared before, holding hands and long embraces and cheek kisses, doing things for each other, making sacrifices, working, trying, fighting and resolving, and the words, the almost words, the almost phrases that almost meant.

Yet, Eddie never called Richie his boyfriend. He never said that he loved Richie. He never even said that he liked Richie. He said that he *wanted* Richie, but Richie wasn't sure if that was the same. He never called Richie anything other than a friend, or a best friend. He said there was a *this*. There was a *here*. But there wasn't a label.

He felt like Eddie used to, poring over the list of chemicals in a new processed food, trying to make sense of all the little ingredients and figure out: *is this going to kill me?*

Richie stared at himself in the mirror, trying to work up the courage to even ask the questions out loud to himself, but he never could establish what the right wording was. Would it be better to ask Eddie to be his boyfriend, or ask if Eddie already was his boyfriend, or ask if that was something Eddie had even thought about wanting to be called or call him in return?

It could be a step too far. After all, lots of people dated for days or weeks or months before calling themselves a boyfriend, before calling it a relationship. Richie forgot what it was called in the interim period. Seeing each other. Going out. Dating. Together.

Maybe even that was too much. So then, it would be best to gauge the strength of Eddie's affections towards him first. There were so many degrees of affection, and Richie felt he knew them all like the back of his hand, because any that he'd experienced were in direct comparison to the unconditional, encompassing love he felt for Eddie.

A crush, a passing fancy, a curiosity, a pining, a yearning, an attraction, a liking, a fling, a dalliance, an awakening, a desire, a passion, an obsession, a romance, a love, a true love, a soulmate. Richie groaned. The lines between friendship and sex and love were so blurry, like the world without his glasses.

If Eddie didn't like him romantically, even if he liked him platonically and sexually, then it was a moot point, because Richie was in love with him. Unless Eddie reciprocated his feelings on an emotional level, then it wasn't enough, and Richie was going to get hurt at some point. They needed to be on the same page or get on the same page.

He rubbed his eyes. There was such a narrow window of hope, such a wide set of parameters which built the pillars of the best case scenario, that Richie felt his disappointment was all but inevitable. It would be too perfect, too lucky, for Eddie to fall in love with Richie just as Richie had fallen in love with him.

So then, he reached the same fork in the road that he did every day. Either ask Eddie and risk losing everything that they had discovered between them, risk losing their friendship too, risk losing Eddie

completely, or stay quiet and enjoy the time with Eddie that he could have, as all the while his hopes, expectations, beliefs and desires strengthened, so that should it come crashing down, he risked breaking his own heart in more tragic, dangerous and brutal ways than he could ever have imagined.

‘Fuck, fuck, fuck,’ he muttered to himself.

He wasn’t expecting a guest that day, but Eddie turned up at his door.

‘Can we talk?’

Richie didn’t like the look on his face, didn’t like that Eddie wasn’t looking at him with the same gleeful excitement that he had been of late, didn’t like that Eddie hadn’t touched him at all, not even a subtle graze at the elbow, didn’t like that Eddie marched straight upstairs without waiting for Richie’s response, without even so much as a real greeting.

When the bedroom door closed, it was worse. Eddie didn’t go to him, Eddie didn’t kiss him, Eddie didn’t lock his gaze and catch his breath, Eddie didn’t slide his hands around Richie’s neck or his waist, Eddie didn’t flush hot and longing. Instead, he just went to the edge of the bed, not even sprawling across the duvet, and sat with his feet firmly planted on the floor.

‘Hey,’ Richie said weakly.

Eddie’s jaw clenched. ‘Hi,’ he said, turning his head towards him, the ghost of a smile on his lips.

‘What,’ Richie started, coughing, moving to sit beside Eddie, ‘what do you want to talk about?’

‘This,’ Eddie said, carefully, as they both looked ahead, one at the wall, one out the window.

Richie felt like he’d turned to marble. ‘This?’

‘Yeah,’ Eddie rubbed his sweating palms on his knees. ‘What this is. What it means.’

Richie's heart was on a high-wire, stepping back and forth, trying to balance, trying to ignore the drop below. 'Okay,' he said quietly, mentally readying himself.

Eddie hesitated, staring at the same nondescript spot of the wall as though it was the centre of the universe. 'I've been doing a lot of thinking.'

Darting a glance at him, Richie noticed he wasn't smiling. If he wasn't smiling, then he wasn't happy, he wasn't excited, he wasn't about to delightedly announce that Richie was the love of his life and ask him to run off into the sunset.

'It's been really fucking hard,' Eddie said, leaning forwards to rest his elbows on his knees.

Like a helpless member of the circus audience, Richie watched his heart lose its footing and topple from the tightrope, desperately trying to grab hold of the oscillating wire, vibrating like the string of a guitar, unsteadied, ringing out loud and stomach-churning. It plummeted inside him, falling down, down, down.

Eddie sighed heavily and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he said flatly, 'I think I'm gay.'

Richie's heart landed in a net, cradled. 'What?' he asked, snapping his head around.

Breath shallowing, Eddie said, 'Pretty sure. Pretty sure I'm,' he inhaled raggedly. 'I can't say it again.'

Pawing through the rubble of the metaphorical wall which had crumbled between them, Richie lightly rested his hands on Eddie, again and again in different places, his shoulders, his thighs, his hands, his neck. He was begging his brain to catch up with his body so that he knew how to process this information and comfort Eddie simultaneously.

'Fuck,' Eddie huffed, then burst into tears, his head falling into his hands. It was right, he knew it was right. As soon as he said it out loud to himself in the shower, he'd suspected that it was true, but

now having said it out loud to another person, to Richie, he knew without a shadow of a doubt. He was gay. He liked boys, and he didn't like girls.

Wishing he had the right words prepared, Richie shuffled, climbing onto the bed so that he could sit behind Eddie, his longer legs still flopping over the edge of the duvet. He wrapped his arms around Eddie's middle, rested his chin in the crook of Eddie's neck, and pressed his chest flush to Eddie's back; it jolted as he cried.

'It's okay, Eds,' Richie said softly, as Eddie's breathing slowed. 'You're safe. I'm here.' He kissed his skin lightly. 'It's me. It's only me.'

Eddie let his trembling arms wrap around himself, draped over Richie's. 'I just don't need this, Richie. I don't need this too.'

'What do you mean?'

He rocked his head back so that it rested on Richie's shoulder. 'I can't catch a break. I'm already a kid with a dead dad, a psychotic mom, a panic disorder and hypochondria. I'm a clean-freak, I'm a control-freak, I've always been a fucking loser, and now, I'm a fucking,' he stopped, and replaced whatever word he was going to use with a loud groan, a bass scream. 'It's just so fucking unfair.'

Richie didn't have anything more profound or comforting to say than, 'Yeah.'

Eddie pulled himself away from Richie's embrace and stood, walking to the centre of the room as though it were the centre of the universe, as though somehow it would ground him, like everything else could revolve around him and he could stay still. Richie stood and went to him, as though drawn by the same gravity, needing to be near him. He reached for Eddie's hand and pulled him around to face him.

As soon as their eyes met, Eddie broke again, only this time he fell into Richie, hands balling into fists as he clutched Richie's shirt and buried his face into Richie's chest. Richie held him, one hand rubbing his back, one hand rooting into the hair at the nape of his neck.

'It's all too fucking real now,' Eddie said, craning his head up. 'These

past few months have been,' he struggled, 'I don't know, like a hallucination, or something. Like something only I could see, or you could see. I've been kind of lost in it, but not in a bad way; I didn't want to be found, I wasn't looking for the way out.' He stumbled, 'But, now I know there isn't one, even if I went looking for it, and that's different.'

'Why?' Richie asked, fear bubbling in his stomach like a thick, viscous potion.

Eddie blinked, 'It's like going into a maze. I wanted to find the centre, wanted to get there, know what was there waiting for me. And now I've found it and I want to get out again, but I'm looking around, and the hedges have all grown over so I can't leave.' He sniffled, 'And I'm scared. And I'm alone.'

Richie gripped each of Eddie's cheeks. 'You're not alone. You're never alone, Eddie. I'm right fucking here.'

'Fine,' Eddie conceded. 'Then, at best, we're alone.'

'Together,' Richie tried, leaning his forehead against Eddie's. 'It's that worth something?'

'Alone. Alone together,' Eddie weighed each option in his hands. 'I don't know which is better, Rich.'

That hurt. More than Richie could express in words. His face contorted and he begged that Eddie wouldn't say anything else, but his prayers went unheeded.

'I can't tell my mom. I can't tell my friends.' He sniffed, his voice garbled, 'I'm never gonna be able to be with someone the way everyone else gets to fucking be with someone. Can't fucking walk down the street holding hands, or go on a date to a public place, or fucking kiss in front of fucking anyone.'

Richie had been here. Richie had thought these things before. He knew how hard they were to think; how difficult they were to bury.

Eddie sighed, defeated. 'I'm never gonna get fucking married. I'm never gonna have kids. I don't even know if I want those things, but

it doesn't matter. I don't have a choice. It's just no. Blocked off. Can't. Ever.'

'But you have me,' Richie said quietly. 'We have each other.'

Eddie brought his hands to Richie's wrists, stroking gently, 'But I don't want that for you either. Jesus Christ, how could I want that for you? Always fucking hiding, always making sacrifices, never getting what you fucking want.'

'You're what I want,' Richie stressed. 'Fuck the rest. I don't fucking need it.'

'How can you fucking say that?' Eddie spluttered. 'How?'

Richie wept, 'Because I love you, Eddie.' He kissed him, desperate and beautiful. 'Alright? I love you.'

Eddie knew that Richie loved him. It wasn't new information. Richie had written a song about him, after all. He'd known from the beginning, from that first kiss.

But I swear I never thought I'd love

Anybody like I love you

Only, Eddie wasn't supposed to hear the song, and hadn't heard those words and known they were about him.

Then, Eddie had said, 'You're in love with me,' to Richie, and Richie had affirmed it by saying, 'It's fucked up, I know.' That was hardly a beautiful response. Eddie had said it again, later: 'I found out you love me.' Richie hadn't even acknowledged it. He had referenced falling in love with Eddie a couple of times, in a panicked stream which included references to IT. Not exactly romantic.

The big one had come when they were lying side by side in Eddie's bed, when Richie said, 'I loved you before this started, and I'll still love you tomorrow.' That was a moment, a real moment, and Eddie had let it swathe him like sunlight on his skin.

Yet, it hadn't been something present. Loved: past. I'll love: future. It

almost distanced it, made it hypothetical, separate, indirect. He'd never said 'I love you' in so few words to him, directly to his face. Until now.

Eddie kissed him, hard, pushing his body up against Richie's, so hard that Richie had to step backwards a few times, but Eddie went with him, instinctively, like a dance they'd rehearsed a dozen times.

'Say it again,' Eddie requested breathily.

Richie looked confused for a moment, then stammered, 'I love you.'

Eddie kissed him again, passionate and petrified.

He felt like the ground had fallen away and he was falling with it, like the flip in your stomach as you hear the branch you're holding crack above you, like the jolt of surprise when you think there's an extra step at the top of the stairs, or when the music builds in a horror movie only for a friendly character to suddenly enter the scene.

'Say it again,' Eddie repeated, pressing his lips over every peak and valley in Richie's face, over every other freckle, over the bow and string off his mouth.

'I love you,' Richie whimpered, his grip tightening around Eddie, nails digging into his clothes so hard they were sure to leave crescent marks on the skin below, like little red moons.

Eddie kissed him harder still, guiding them both onto the bedclothes, relieved and reticent.

It was how he felt when he leapt from the cliff at the top of the quarry, how he felt when the clown's face disintegrated and IT dropped back into its lair, how he felt when he finally stood up to his mother, how he felt when he threw the last of his counterfeit pills away, how he felt when he had first sang for Richie, how he felt when he had played the piano to Richie's enraptured ear.

'Again,' Eddie begged, slowly unbuttoning Richie's shirt, letting his hands spread over the downy curls of his chest hair. He removed his own shirt and began to kiss down Richie's neck. 'God, please, say it

again.'

Richie burned. 'I love you, Eds.'

As they kissed, Eddie was flooded with the memories of when he realised that Richie's song was about him, when he had pushed Richie up against his bedroom door, when he had dared to lace his hands with Richie's at the movie theatre, when he had allowed Richie into his bedroom in the dead of night, when he had shut them in Richie's garage, when he'd first removed Richie's shirt, when he found out just how long Richie had loved him, when he had kissed Richie in his basement, in the school, in the woods, in his living room, and the time when his hands had slipped below Richie's belt.

Eddie's hands moved down Richie's body. He unbuckled his belt, undid the buttons, then did the same to himself. His heart ached as he tugged at the unforgiving denim of Richie's jeans.

'Shall I take them off?' Richie asked hotly, and when Eddie nodded, he arched his back to pull them down. Eddie took the opportunity to remove his own trousers, peeling off his socks which prompted Richie to remove his, and then his glasses.

Laying himself down, Eddie pushed his hips against Richie's and whined softly. He brought his hand to Richie's cheek and stared down into his elegiac eyes. 'God, Richie. What did I do?' he asked helplessly. 'What did I ever fucking do?'

Richie pulled him down into another flawless kiss. The weight of Eddie's body on his replaced the weight of carrying those words around inside himself for so long. Once they'd been said, he felt his heart expand so that it filled his body, pushing into the tips of his fingers and toes, surging with heat and oxygen and adrenaline.

Eddie began planting kisses wherever there was skin to kiss; on each of Richie's fingertips, his palms, the insides of his wrists, on each one of his ribs, in the hollow below his breastbone, down the centre of his abdomen, around his bellybutton, and in the crevices of his hips.

Richie raked his hands through Eddie's hair, pushing it back so that he could see his face, watch every time Eddie's lips made contact

with his body, watch the shadows of Eddie's eyelashes dancing over his cheeks. 'God, I want to say it again.'

Between kisses, Eddie's eyes flashed at him, and a smile broke on his face. 'Then say it again.'

Lamenting the thousands of times when he had been with Eddie and thought it before, Richie whispered, 'You want to hear it?'

Eddie kissed up the centre of his body until he found Richie's lips. 'Fuck, Richie, it's a good thing to hear.'

Richie reached up for Eddie's face like it was made of crystal and might shatter at any moment. 'I love you, Eddie.'

Every time Richie said it, Eddie felt a bolt score through his system, like lightning, scarring him fractured and fractally. He kissed him delicately, perfectly, wishing he could make Richie feel as wonderful as he did right now, wishing he could say it back.

Richie gushed, 'It feels so good to say it.'

Shifting down, Eddie reached below the elastic of Richie's underwear. 'As good as this?'

His spine arching, Richie growled, 'Tough call.'

With a smirk, Eddie pulled down Richie's boxers, shuffling backwards as he did so. Richie helpfully raised his ankles, his knees, to assist, almost shaking as he realised that soon he would be wearing no clothes at all.

Eddie stared at his body like he was mapping it, memorising him. 'You're so fucking beautiful, Richie,' he said.

Eyebrows steepled, Richie's eyes shined with a fresh veil of tears, only these were gorgeous tears, stunned and aweing, overcome. Nobody had ever called him beautiful before. He'd never been objectively beautiful, he knew that. But when Eddie said it, he almost believed him, believed that he meant it, and for the first time, Richie really *felt* like he was. He felt beautiful, in every sense of the word.

Scared, but so little in comparison to how remarkable and whole he felt, Eddie leaned to kiss the insides of Richie's thighs, pushing his knees slightly further apart as he did so.

'Is this okay?' Eddie checked, glancing his eyes up at Richie.

Richie nodded, and watched in stunned reverie as Eddie's lips dragged up his legs, until there was no further for them to go. When Eddie's mouth met him again, Richie's toes curled, his hands balled into fists, his neck contracted, throwing his dark curls back onto the pillow, flattening around his head in disarray, like a black halo.

The noises which sputtered out of him were completely out of his control. He was so torn; trying repeatedly to prop himself up on his elbows so that he could watch Eddie, see that it was him, preserve this in his memories forever, and yet the pleasure which gripped him was so intense that his joints buckled, failing, and he ceaselessly fell back down again, keening.

'Fuck, Eddie,' he said throatily.

'I love it when you say my name like that,' Eddie hummed.

After a while, Richie tugged at Eddie's hair hard enough in warning that Eddie stopped and manoeuvred back up Richie's body, licking his lips. As his face hovered over Richie's, he leaned, then hesitated, 'Can I kiss you? I mean, after –'

Richie kissed him heatedly, chaotically, tasting himself on Eddie's tongue and relishing it. 'Can I do that to you?'

Eddie nodded, and hastily Richie grabbed around his waist and rolled them over, his hands all too eager to remove Eddie's underwear. Once discarded, Richie gripped tightly around each of Eddie's calves, taking in the scene. 'Fucking hell.'

'If you told me four months ago that we'd ever be here,' Eddie laughed, pressing his hands to his forehead.

'I always fucking hoped we would be,' Richie said, leaning himself down. 'Fucking someday.'

Shivering, Eddie said, 'God, I'm really fucking nervous,' The end of the phrase was caught in his throat as he gasped, Richie closing around him. 'Oh fuck,' he puffed, his hands reaching down to knot in Richie's hair, eyes squeezing closed so tightly that phosphenes danced in his retinas, and he had to consciously stop himself from bucking recklessly.

It wasn't long before Eddie started to lose himself, and the moans grew sharper, stunted, and his knees weakened, trembling. 'Richie, Richie, Richie,' he panted arrhythmically, trying to caution him, but Richie had never heard anything quite so arousing in his life and, determined, brought Eddie to the peak of ecstasy and guided him down again.

Euphoric, Eddie gawked hopelessly at Richie as he crawled back up his body, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. 'Can I -?' Richie started to ask, but his lips were quickly met with Eddie's, and then Eddie's hand was wrapped around him.

It was almost impossible to hold himself up as Eddie touched him, but soon the relief came, and as it did, Richie found himself lost in Eddie's unbroken gaze, watching him, studying him, enjoying him. He collapsed to the side, giggling as the dregs of the rush sizzled through him, then reached for the tissues in his bedside drawer, knowing Eddie would need them.

After a slapdash clean-up, they rolled to face one another, and a cold Richie kicked at the duvet and then pulled it over them. They grinned, hands still reaching for each other at waists and shoulders, hauling closer, legs intertwining. They kissed, soft and slow.

'Alone together,' Eddie sighed. 'That's better. Way better.'

'Thank fuck. Yes. Yes, it is.' Richie concurred emphatically, then kissed him.

As Eddie nestled into him, Richie wondered whether being alone together and being together were the same thing. Maybe.

Maybe.

10. Chemistry

Summary for the Chapter:

Following Eddie's declaration of his sexuality, Richie clarifies his own.

'Rich?' Eddie started, lying in bed with Richie curled on top of him.

'Yeah?' he yawned, spreading his arms across Eddie's chest, cat-like.

'Do you ever think that there might be more of us in Derry?'

'What do you mean, "more of us"? ' Richie queried.

Eddie shrugged his shoulders up to his ears. 'You know, more people who are like us. Gay people.'

There was something which Richie had been meaning to address for a while, and though it wasn't Eddie's question, he knew that he should take the opportunity presented. With a deep huff, Richie said, 'I'm not gay.'

'Very funny,' Eddie sniggered, then when he felt Richie tense beside him, his brow furrowed. 'Wait, what?'

Richie squirmed, not looking at him. 'I like girls, Eddie.'

Still unsure whether this was a weird joke, Eddie said with a tentative laugh, 'You know I'm a boy, right?'

'Yeah, Eds,' Richie said steadily, 'I know.'

Eddie's eyebrows twitched, 'You said you thought you were different?'

Richie smacked his lips together, 'And I am, because as you so shrewdly observed, you are a boy.'

'But you said it wasn't just me that made you think so,' Eddie reminded.

‘It’s not,’ Richie confirmed.

Eddie’s eyes flicked. ‘I’m confused.’

‘Yeah, me too, dickhead.’

‘You like boys,’ Eddie stated.

‘Yes,’ Richie nodded once.

‘And girls?’

‘Yeah,’ he nodded again.

Eddie shuffled to sit up, forcing Richie to move. He wanted to look at him, to know this was a serious conversation and not Richie messing with him. ‘Really?’

‘I think so,’ Richie gulped, unsmiling.

Hardly able to conceive of it, Eddie spluttered, ‘Is that a thing? Can you do that?’

Richie frowned, ‘Don’t see why not.’

Eddie blinked hard and rubbed his eyes. ‘Wow. Sorry. I never thought that,’ he babbled. ‘I just assumed that, you know, you were,’ he gestured frenetically. ‘Well, if you’ve liked me since you were,’ he shook his head. ‘How do you know?’

Awkward, uncomfortable, Richie rubbed his neck. ‘How would anyone know? It just, sort of, is what it is. It makes sense to me. It feels right.’

‘Huh,’ Eddie said.

‘It doesn’t matter, does it?’ Richie asked, worried.

Eddie said slowly, ‘No. It doesn’t. I’m just trying to wrap my head around the idea.’

‘In my experience, wrapping your head around the idea can take about half a decade.’ He sighed, ‘Maybe even longer.’

Strangely jealous, Eddie asked, 'Have you ever felt about a girl the way you feel about me?'

Making a face, Richie said, 'Depends what you mean.'

'Does it?' Eddie asked.

'Well, yeah,' Richie said emphatically, as though it should be obvious.

Eddie didn't understand. 'Why?'

Richie's eyes ran over his body, 'Because I like you in so many different ways.'

Eddie shuffled, 'Okay, then. Tell me.' Hastily, he added, 'About the girls, I mean.'

'You sure?' Richie cocked an eyebrow.

Nodding, Eddie insisted, 'Yeah, I'm interested.'

Richie breathed deeply, thinking how best it would be to elucidate Eddie on what he barely had a grasp of himself sometimes. Carefully, he climbed on top of Eddie and dragged his nose up Eddie's neck. 'Alright,' he said, then kissed his jaw. 'Well, there have been girls that I think are cute-cute-cute,' he said, dotting kisses repeatedly over Eddie's dimples until he laughed, 'like you.'

'You don't actually think I'm *cute*, do you?' Eddie asked, wrinkling his nose.

'Yeah,' Richie promised, pinching the apple of his cheek, 'God, I've been saying that for fucking years.'

Eddie batted his hand away, 'But I always thought you were just trying to piss me off.'

Pouting, Richie whined, 'Does it piss you off?'

'Not now, it doesn't,' Eddie said, shuffling. 'It's kind of nice.'

'Don't you think I'm cute too?' Richie asked, fluttering his eyelashes

rapidly as though he were joking, but his heart pounded loud and furious in his chest, wondering if this might be the day that he could finally find out how Eddie felt about him.

Eddie pushed him. 'Fuck off, Tozier,' he said, but when he saw the dark veil briefly sweep across Richie's eyes, he backtracked, smiling, 'Fine, I admit it.'

'Yeah?' Richie checked, hesitantly half-smiling.

'Yeah,' Eddie said, and kissed him. Embarrassed, he reverted, 'Go on, what else?'

Richie hummed, running his hands slowly down Eddie's body. 'There have been girls that I've had, I don't know,' he wagged his head uncertainly, searching for the word, 'chemistry with. Like you.'

'You mean now that my chemistry with Stan is over?' Eddie snorted, remembering Richie's jokes.

He laughed, 'Stan's a good-looking guy, I wouldn't blame you for having chemistry with him.'

Eddie draped his arms over Richie's shoulders. 'Nah, think I'm set.'

Biting his lip, horrendously excited and equally as terrified, Richie dissected this, and rapidly started to feel more confident. He latched onto Eddie's throat until he whimpered. 'There are girls I've thought are hot,' he growled. He raised his head to survey Eddie's face. 'Or pretty,' he said quietly. 'Or fucking both. Like you.'

'Are they different?' Eddie asked softly.

Richie shrugged, 'I think so.'

Rubbing his thumb over Richie's cheek, Eddie considered, 'Yeah, I guess they are.'

Dying to know what Eddie meant by this, Richie almost yelped, but he knew that there were more pressing questions burning in the back of his mind.

Deeply curious to hear what Richie said next, Eddie asked, 'What else?'

'Girls I just fucking like,' Richie blurted, not really talking about girls at all. 'That I get on with. That I find fucking fascinating and just need to know. Like you. That make me fucking laugh. Like you. That seem fucking interested in me, make me feel interesting and not just a boring, crude asshole. That make me feel fucking good about myself. Like you.'

'You are a crude asshole,' Eddie said, revelling in everything that Richie had just said, 'but you're not fucking boring. Jesus, in what world could you be boring?' He kissed him, 'And you should feel good about yourself, you're,' he paused, the compliments cloying in his throat, making him feel so small and vulnerable. He forced one out, weakly, 'You're great.' Needing to distract from his anxiety, he smiled, 'And you make people laugh. Sometimes.'

Richie hummed, 'I can probably count on one hand the times you've told me I'm funny, and I'd need the fucking population of the United States to count how many times you've told me that I'm not funny.'

'Yeah, well,' Eddie smirked, 'I can't let it go to your head.'

'You think I'm funny, Eds?' Richie pressed, mooning.

Eddie knew that Richie was really asking, that he wanted an honest answer. 'Yeah, I think you're funny.' He sighed, 'You're probably the funniest person I know. Even when you're making the same fucking "your mom" joke that you came up with when we were twelve. You just make me laugh.'

Richie smiled so broadly and so warmly, his insides melting into hot caramel. All he ever wanted to do was make Eddie laugh, make Eddie happy. 'Good,' was all he managed to say.

Smiling back, Eddie jabbed his chest, 'But if you tell the other Losers I said that, I will fucking murder you in your sleep.'

'I don't know,' Richie mused. 'Might still be worth it.'

Eddie rolled his eyes, 'Don't test me, Trashmouth.'

‘You couldn’t really kill me, could you, Eds?’ Richie clutched his chest melodramatically. ‘You couldn’t do that. Not after I’ve been so nice to you.’ He let his lips hover precariously over Eddie’s, not quite touching.

Locking his eyes, Eddie murmured, ‘Oh, the things I could do to you, Richie.’ He went to kiss him, then snatched his lips away at the last moment. ‘You have no fucking idea.’

Richie’s gut coiled. Part of him was ready to succumb to Eddie, to drop the conversation and lean into the kissing, the touching and whatever else came after. However, he’d never been so close before. He’d never felt like Eddie was peeling back the layers of his skin and letting Richie see what was underneath, never thought that Eddie might finally reveal the hand which he’d held so close to his chest.

‘Shall I go on?’ he squeaked, diverting.

‘You don’t have to,’ Eddie said, which was the politest way he could think of to say no. He started to bite at Richie’s neck.

‘I want to,’ Richie insisted, squeezing his eyes shut and trying to focus.

Surprised, Eddie leaned back and squished his head into the pillow. ‘Okay then,’ he said reluctantly.

‘If, when you ask if I’ve felt about a girl the way I feel about you, you’re actually asking if I’ve ever loved a girl, then the answer is no.’ Richie vowed, ‘I love you, and I’ve only ever loved you.’

‘That wasn’t what I was asking,’ he promised. ‘I knew that already.’

‘But over the years,’ Richie coughed, blushing, ‘rarely, mind you, I’d like someone and think about,’ he bit his lip, hoping that by now Eddie understood what he was getting at, ‘what it would mean if they liked me back.’

Guilty dread oozed through Eddie’s spine.

Richie went on, ‘I’d think about, maybe, what it would be like to go out somewhere, on a proper date, or if I’d be any fucking good at

being a boyfriend. What it'd be like,' he swallowed, 'if someone really wanted to be with me.'

Eddie's brain seared into overdrive and all he could think was: *don't say it.*

Richie choked, 'Like –'

'My mom,' Eddie cut him off. 'Saw that one coming.'

Faking a smile, his lungs collapsing, Richie said, 'You see right through me, Eds.'

Hastily, Eddie kissed him, pushing Richie up to sit as he did so. Then he tapped his cheek, 'Hey, do you have your guitar with you?'

Richie nodded, climbing off him. 'Yeah, why?'

'I have a surprise for you, is all,' Eddie smiled. 'Come on.' He rolled out of the bed and dressed himself, carelessly clawing a hand through his hair.

Reluctantly, Richie followed suit. 'A surprise?' he queried, trying to act nonchalant, trying to act upbeat. It made him ramble. 'You have a surprise for me which involves my guitar? You haven't learned to play guitar or something, have you? Because so help me God, Eddie, if you're better at it than me, I'll lose my fucking mind.'

Eddie laughed, trying to stay bright, though he could sense something wasn't right. 'No, don't worry. You're safe.'

'Am I?' Richie asked, as he and Eddie left the room, and something in his core tightened, like a corkscrew had been driven into his chest and was slowly twisting, driving a spiralised hole through his body, ready to pluck out his heart.

Light-footed, Eddie trotted down the stairs and into his living room, skirting around the scattered floor to reach the piano. Meanwhile, Richie fetched his guitar from the hallway. When he came into the room, Eddie was already sat down with the keys on display, toying with the pedals, getting annoyed when they squeaked.

‘So, what’s the surprise?’ Richie asked.

Grinning, Eddie said, ‘Okay, so it took me fucking ages to figure it out, but you know that song you said you were learning, the *Tears for Fears* one?’

‘Yeah?’ Richie said, his spirits lifting slightly.

Eddie tapped the music resting on the stand. It was handwritten, painstakingly, in pencil, stave after stave. ‘I’ve learned it too. So we can play it together.’

‘Really?’ Richie asked, smiling, genuinely smiling. He leaned over to admire Eddie’s handiwork. ‘Fuck. I didn’t know you could do this.’

‘I mean, we should see if it works first,’ Eddie chuckled. ‘I might have done it all in the wrong key for you and find it a bitch to transpose.’

Richie shrugged, ‘Music mumbo-jumbo, Eds. Shall we just give it a go?’

Scratching his neck, Eddie said, ‘I will try to sing, but it’s really fucking hard to sing and play at the same time. You make it look so easy.’

‘Told you, Eds. Everything I do seems effortless.’

Eddie waved him off. ‘Yeah, yeah, I know. Part of your charm,’ he quoted.

‘So you agree?’ Richie pushed, needing a win. ‘You think I’m charming?’

‘Prince fucking Charming.’ Eddie rolled his eyes sarcastically, returning his focus to the piano. ‘Known for his modesty, of course.’

‘Does that make you the damsel in distress?’ Richie teased.

Eddie scoffed, ‘Fuck you. Are we gonna play or what?’

‘Okay,’ Richie said, finding his first chord. ‘You start singing, and I’ll pick it up if you lose it.’

'Thanks for the vote of confidence,' Eddie muttered, but he was smiling. He counted them in, and they both began to play. It became clear after only a few seconds that they were in the right key, and the song blossomed around them.

Eddie's brow furrowed as he tried to concentrate on his hands and his voice simultaneously.

*I wanted to be with you alone
And talk about the weather
But traditions I can trace against the child in your face
Won't escape my attention*

'I'm fucking up the melody,' Eddie complained.

'I got it,' Richie said, and started to sing.

As Eddie played on, mute, the lyrics flooded from Richie's mouth, but not unconsciously, and for the first time, he felt like he was really listening to them, understanding what they meant, and he hated it.

*You keep your distance with a system of touch
And gentle persuasion
I'm lost in admiration, could I need you this much?
Oh, you're wasting my time
You're just, just, just wasting time*

More confident with the chorus, Eddie managed to jump back onto the tune, which was just as well, because Richie's voice was huskier than usual.

*Something happens and I'm head over heels
I never find out till I'm head over heels
Something happens and I'm head over heels
Ah, don't take my heart, don't break my heart
Don't, don't, don't throw it away*

As Richie dropped off, something catching in his throat, Eddie was able to sing on.

*I made a fire and I'm watching it burn
Thought of your future*

'I'm shit at the verses,' Eddie whined, cursing himself.

With a ragged breath, Richie picked it up.

With one foot in the past, now, just how long will it last?

No, no, no, have you no ambition?

'Alright, I've got it,' Eddie tried again, and it was just as well, because Richie was finding it difficult to continue.

My mother and my brothers used to breathe in clean air

And dreaming I'm a doctor

It's hard to be a man when there's a gun in your hand

Oh, I feel so

Richie echoed him, then surged back into the chorus, frustrated and sad. He wanted to be enjoying this moment, wished that he wasn't overthinking it, overanalysing every lyric they sang, his brain stuck and looping over a thousand conversations, over every almost word that Eddie had ever said, and over every word he hadn't.

Eddie's part grew more complex, so Richie was left to solo through the coda, staring hopelessly at the boy in front of him, the boy that he loved with every cell in his body, every note in an octave and every strum of his heart.

And this my four-leaf clover

I'm on the line, one open mind

This is my four-leaf clover

In my mind's eye

One little boy, wandering by

Funny how

Time flies.

The song came to a close. It seemed like it had lasted an aeon to Richie, and mere seconds to Eddie.

'Could've been worse,' Eddie shrugged. 'Sorry for my shitty singing.'

'It's okay,' Richie said. His brain was still at breakneck speed, like a car's wheels rapidly rotating but only grinding deeper into the mud.

‘When it works, we sound really good together,’ Eddie said quietly, feeling Richie’s sombre energy encroaching on him, like the rolling black clouds of a thunderstorm.

Richie clenched his jaw, ‘Yeah. We are good together.’

Eddie closed the piano lid and stood. ‘Maybe we should experiment with some other tracks,’ he said absentmindedly.

As he packed away his guitar and went back upstairs to Eddie’s room, the degrees of affection which Richie had identified the other day came screaming back, of crushes and flings and obsessions and romances. He’d forgotten one. He’d forgotten a crucial, vital, damning one. An experiment. After all, Eddie did say they had *chemistry* together.

All of a sudden, a question came. He finally found the words. As Eddie flumped down on the bed, Richie blurted, ‘Eddie, has this all been an experiment?’

Eddie furrowed his brow, ‘Has what all been an experiment?’

‘This,’ Richie repeated. ‘Me. Are you experimenting with me?’

Struck dumb, Eddie’s mouth flapped open and closed like a fish out of water. He made a few aspirate choking sounds, almost as though he was trying to speak but had lost his voice, or had it stolen. He finally managed, ‘What? Where did that come from?’

Richie pressed, ‘Answer the question.’

‘Do you seriously think the answer might be yes?’ Eddie spluttered, flabbergasted.

‘Are you saying it isn’t?’ Richie asked, flicking his eyes to the side, trying to unravel this.

Eddie reeled, ‘Of course you’re not a fucking experiment. Christ, Richie.’

‘I’m not?’ Richie checked.

'I can't believe you just asked me that,' Eddie said, offended.

Richie clambered onto the bed beside him. 'I'm sorry, I just,' he sighed, and the floodgates finally opened, 'don't know what this is. To you, I mean. I don't know where you are, where we are.'

'Well, it's not an *experiment*,' Eddie said definitively, trying to sound calm, but his heart was thudding. He prayed that there wouldn't be too much follow-up.

'Was it ever?' Richie asked carefully. 'I mean, surely at the beginning, it kind of was.'

Eddie wrinkled his nose, 'Experiment isn't the right word. It was a gamble. That's what we said at the time.'

'What's the difference?' he asked, then quickly added, 'I'm not saying there isn't a difference. I just don't know what the difference is.'

Letting his thoughts spill out as he came to them, Eddie said, 'Well, experiments are clinical. Isolated. Makes it sound cold. It's all facts, facts, facts. When you gamble, you've got something to lose. You have to go with your gut.'

Richie smiled hesitantly, 'Is that what happened with me, then? You went with your gut?'

Eddie looked at him and raised his eyebrows, 'Yeah, I guess I did.'

'So,' Richie shuffled, edging closer to Eddie, 'if it was a gamble then, what is it now?'

With a great heaving sigh, Eddie face dropped. It was happening. He'd tried long and hard to postpone this moment, to give himself a little more time, but the jig was up. Richie needed answers. 'I don't know.'

Richie's brow furrowed. 'You don't know?'

'I don't know,' Eddie said again. 'I don't know what it is.'

'Do you know what you want it to be?' Richie tried.

Eddie shook his head, 'I have no idea.'

Richie trilled his lips, 'Oh.' It felt like a great bass drum smacked in his core, sending low, devastating shock waves through his body.

'Sorry,' Eddie said meekly.

'No idea at all?' he urged hopefully.

Eddie's lip curled, 'Honestly, Richie, it still feels like a gamble.'

Licking his lips, Richie decided to go with a different approach, the one which scared him most. 'How do you feel about me?'

Throat closing, Eddie strained, 'I don't know, Richie.'

Richie's head thudded against the headboard and he groaned. 'Eddie, you're going to have to do better than that. I'm sorry. "I don't know" isn't good enough.'

Cheeks flushing hot, Eddie said, 'It's so fucking hard, Richie. You're my best friend. You've been my best friend for a long time. But now, you're also someone that I kiss and touch and you-know-what-else and not only that, but you're the only person I've ever really wanted to do all those things with, and I feel like it'd be so much easier to know what that all meant if we weren't such fucking good friends.'

Puffing out his cheeks, Richie mumbled, 'Right.'

Frustrated, Eddie gushed, 'I try and reconcile it all into one picture that makes sense to me. And when that doesn't work, I try to separate it all out so I can make sense of all the little pieces and I can't seem to do that either. I don't know where one part starts and the other stops. It's all so fucking –'

'Blurry,' Richie finished.

'Yeah,' Eddie sighed. 'I don't know what to do to make it easier. I think I just need more time.'

Richie grumbled, 'It's already been four months. Don't you think you'd know by now?' Closing his eyes with resignation, he asked, 'Is it

possible you're just searching for it because you know that's what I want to hear, but really, I'm just a friend that you happen to be able to screw around with?'

Eddie looked at him, studying his forlorn face, and thought very carefully. Raggedly, he said, 'Richie, look at me.'

Hesitantly, Richie opened his eyes.

Exhaling deeply, Eddie locked his gaze. 'I don't think you realise how much shit I'm dealing with here all at once.'

'What do you mean?' Richie asked.

'Four months is not a long time, Richie,' Eddie said steadily. 'It's not a long time for me to come to the terms with the fact that I'm gay in a small, homophobic fucking town where people like me are routinely beaten up and even killed, where I've been taught my entire life that people like me are sick, perverse and wrong, and where I'm never going to be able to be who I am without fear.'

Richie understood that. It had taken him the best part of half a decade to start to ratify his attraction to boys and his attraction to girls, to accept that his parents might believe him sinful, to learn how to swallow the words he longed to declare to his friends, to learn to hide and avoid attracting unwanted attention, to discover any decent information about whether being queer was an illness that could be cured, to even start to overcome his fears, to try and forget the clown.

Eddie sighed, his gaze slipping to Richie's mouth. 'It's not a long time for me to come to terms with the fact that I want to kiss you, that I want to touch you, that I want to take your clothes off and if I'm really being honest, maybe even fuck you, when I've spent my whole life being afraid of doing all those things with literally anybody, let alone a boy, thanks to my fucking mother and her psychotic bullshit.'

Richie wished he had a little more control over the blood in his body when Eddie's confession that he'd thought about having sex with him scored through him like a white-hot iron poker. He tried to refocus onto the latter half of the sentence, where Eddie admitted that all

sexual contact scared him.

He remembered the summer when they'd fought IT, and Eddie had been harassed by the leper, a leper which had tried to fellate him. Part of Eddie had known back then, somewhere buried in his most subconscious, darkest fears. And yet, Eddie felt safe enough with Richie that he could break through that time and time again, and Eddie had been asking for it, initiating it, enjoying it.

Eddie wasn't done. 'It's not a long time to come to terms with the fact that my best friend, who is a boy, is in love with me and has been in love with me for most of the time we've known each other, which throws a very confusing new perspective onto our entire friendship, the way we are with each other, and every interaction we've ever fucking shared.'

Richie considered this. He thought of Eddie shouting at him in the school bathroom, telling him to stop with his nicknames and his jokes and his teasing and his touching, because all of a sudden, Eddie recognised that Richie had been flirting with him all along.

Then he thought of so much more. He thought of every time he'd squeezed into the hammock with Eddie, every time their hands had brushed, every time they'd looked at each other a little too long, every time they'd tackled and tickled each other, every time he had thrown Eddie a compliment, every time Eddie had looked after him when he was sick, every time Eddie had tried to impress him, every time he and Eddie had done something because of each other, for each other.

Eddie started to breath shallow, 'Not to mention how much strain we might be putting on that friendship, how much jeopardy it might be in now. You're one of the most important people, if not the most important person, in my life and I'm just fucking terrified at the thought of not calling you a friend anymore if we fuck this up.'

Richie shuddered. He didn't even let himself think about it; the thought was as absurd as it was heart-breaking.

Eddie shook his head, 'And somehow, I'm trying to come to terms with all that and try and figure out if I'm in love with you, falling in

love with you, going to fall in love with you, if I like you like that but I won't love you, if I like you like that at all, if I'm starting to like you, if I will like you, if I want to date you, if we're accidentally already dating, if there's an us, if we're together or, if we're not, then if I want to be, when I've never been in love, liked or dated anyone else before and have absolutely no frame of reference to compare it to.'

Richie reeled at Eddie's rapid-fire list. There was so much in there which he wanted to ask about that he hardly knew where he would start, even if he could ask, which he couldn't. Not right now.

'Four months for all that?' Eddie spluttered. 'I'm shocked that I've got this fucking far.'

Richie pursed his lips, 'We really should be talking about all this more, shouldn't we?'

With a half-laugh, Eddie said, 'Maybe.'

Not knowing what else to do, Richie leaned over and drew Eddie into a hug. They stayed there, silently for a moment, before Eddie asked, 'Will you answer me something honestly?'

'Yeah,' Richie said.

Eddie pulled back to look at him. 'How long can you do this, Richie?'

'Do what?' Richie asked, furrowing his brow.

Emotional, Eddie whispered, 'Wait for me.'

Richie's gut gurgled as scanned Eddie's pained expression. 'I've been waiting for you for so long, that sometimes I think I could wait forever.'

'But?' Eddie sensed.

It poured out of him quickly, dangerously, 'But every day now feels like a month used to, and every day I fall in love with you a little bit more and so I know it'll hurt a little bit more if I lose you, because now I actually know how fucking amazing it might be to really have

you. It's like I can see it, you know? It's like we're almost there, but I don't know if what's left in front of us is just grass we need to tread or a river that we just need to find a boat for or a giant fucking chasm that we'll never cross.' He grimaced, groaning helplessly, wishing he'd shut up a few phrases ago. 'Sorry, that's not very reassuring. I don't want to put you under that kind of pressure.'

'I've been under a lot of pressure from the beginning, Rich,' Eddie huffed. 'It's not your fault that I found out the way I did but trying to figure all this out with someone who is already in love with you is a fucking ton of pressure, especially when that person is you, because I really do want you to be happy.' He smiled melancholically, 'I want you to have everything you fucking want. And I want the person you love to love you back.'

Richie kissed him, hard.

'But I don't want to make you wait forever,' Eddie said when their lips snapped apart. 'I don't want to keep you in this fucking purgatory, meeting me fucking halfway. You could get really, really fucking hurt, and I don't want to break your heart.'

'I —' Richie started, but before he could say anything else, Eddie clamped a hand over his mouth to stop him from talking.

Eddie said, 'Think about it, Richie. You don't need to have all the answers right now. In fact, don't answer right now because I know what you'll say and I don't want you to make me a promise you can't keep.'

After Eddie dropped his hand, Richie didn't say anything, just looked at him and nodded so that Eddie knew he understood.

Looking at the time, Eddie said, 'You should probably get home.'

Richie felt like he already was. He always did, with Eddie. And he never wanted to leave.

Notes for the Chapter:

Head Over Heels - Tears For Fears

11. Almost

Summary for the Chapter:

Eddie's in low spirits, so Richie tries to reassure him.

Since their conversation, Eddie had been increasingly subdued, and Richie hated to see it. He knew it was the right thing to have asked Eddie about the status of their relationship, but he hadn't heard what he wanted to hear, and the levity of their liaison had been replaced with a heavy burden.

Eddie hadn't told him to fuck off all week, and they'd not spent any evenings alone together either. Richie had tried to make jokes, but even his worst offences hardly garnered more than a half-hearted beep-beep. He'd tried to make time for them, but Eddie always cut it short.

He presumed that Eddie was inevitably preparing for the moment when Richie told him that he couldn't do this, that he couldn't wait any longer, that having the almost was worse than not having at all. So, Richie had thought and thought about how to bring Eddie back up again, to assure him, to try and alleviate some of the pressure which had been brought down upon him.

He managed to convince Eddie to come to the music room one Friday lunchtime, under the guise that he had a song which he wanted to play for him.

'Alright, sit down, Eds,' Richie said, tugging the stool out from underneath the piano.

Eddie did. 'What's going on with you? You're all sweaty.'

Running a hand over his sheening brow, Richie said, 'I'm a little nervous.'

'You've played for me a dozen times,' Eddie chuckled.

'Not something I've written,' Richie blushed.

Eddie bit his lip, 'You've written something?'

'Well, I took a bit of a shortcut,' Richie admitted. 'But yeah, I've written something. For you.'

Hot, burning, Eddie swallowed, 'Really?'

Richie nodded. 'Can I play it for you?'

Reluctantly, Eddie said, 'Yeah. Okay.'

He made a few mistakes in the early chords as his fingers trembled, as though they were freezing cold. He gripped the plectrum between his thumb and forefinger tightly, pressed his callused hands to the fretboard hard enough to leave indentations through his fingerprints.

Whispering, his breath catching, Eddie recognised the chord progression. 'This is the song you wrote about me.'

'Almost,' Richie corrected, and then he started to sing.

It's not often at just eighteen years

You're forced to face your wildest fears

I never knew someone so brave as you.

He caught Eddie's eyes; they were swimming, shimmering like the surface of the quarry in the summertime, like rainbow trout circled through them, scales glinting and refracting the light.

Then when I felt you kiss me back

You gave me your asthma attacks

And all that's red inside me craved for blue

Eddie couldn't help a small laugh, and the dancing sound lifted Richie's spirits enough for him to smile through the start of the chorus.

And through my coke-bottle glasses

I've seen you take a thousand chances

And still I find that we've been so fucking blind

We live through stolen glances

Yet I keep searching for the answers

You ask yourself if maybe there's an us

Richie's throat spasmed, and he begged himself to keep hold of the moment, the song, and Eddie's attention, even as his heart began to throb in his chest and his stomach began to churn with relentless anxiety.

And you think I can't wait

But I'll wait long enough.

Eddie's eyelids flickered and Richie spotted a lone tear start to trickle over his cheek, before he hastily and surreptitiously wiped it away. Richie wasn't sure if it was a good sign or a bad one, or if somehow it was neither, as he pushed on into the second verse.

Upon a bridge our names are carved

Preserved just like our matching scars

I put it there before the kiss it promises.

Quizzical, Eddie furrowed his brow at this, and Richie realised that he'd still never shown Eddie the R + E which he had scored into the kissing bridge all those years ago. He hoped that soon he could, and that Eddie might have enough courage and strength in his body that, should they be alone, they might be able to share at least one kiss there.

Somehow each one feels like the first

Suspended between stars and earth

I'll float until you can describe what this is.

Eddie leaned forwards to rest his elbows on his knees, his hands clasped together, thumbs rubbing ritualistically over each other. His head briefly dropped to exhale heavily, and then he cautiously raised his head to lock Richie's gaze again.

And through my coke-bottle glasses

I've seen you take a thousand chances

And now I find that we've been so fucking blind

We live through stolen glances

Yet I keep searching for the answers

You ask yourself if maybe this is love

Even as he said the word, Richie felt that tug in his heart which had grown so familiar, the rope which tied him to Eddie so intrinsically for so long that he doubted if it would even be possible for it to sever.

You don't need to be in love

Because I love you enough.

Richie's dexterous fingers twanged with the strings, improvising and riffing in ways that he wasn't able even four months ago, when he had played the song the first time.

And as the Derry air gets colder

You just keep on getting bolder

I'll wrap my arm around your shoulder

I'll still take every chance to hold ya.

He smiled at Eddie with such complete love that Eddie instinctively smiled back; infectious, reflex.

I reach for you like an arcade claw

You're the one I learned first aid for

The one these songs are always played for

The one I gave up my charade for

Eddie's heart buckled as memories cascaded through him, of them playing Street Fighter in the arcade, of bloody knees and slashed palms, and the newer memories of playing music together, making music together, and Richie bending over backwards at every turn to try and make Eddie happy, to give Eddie what he needed. He felt torn between two Richies, two versions of the boy in front of him that he knew had to overlap somewhere.

And I was once foolish enough

To believe there couldn't be an us

I just never thought you'd let me love

You in the way that I do.

Richie had to fight the choke in his own throat, needing to make it to the end of the song, needing to get the last words out.

And I've been so lucky this far

I forget we had different starts

I can't learn to play your heart

Like guitar and I don't want to.

They had been lucky. They'd both been lucky, and they both thought so, but Richie and Eddie thought they were lucky in extraordinarily different ways.

And through my coke-bottle glasses

I've seen you take a thousand chances

And now I find that we've been so fucking blind

You steal back each of my glances

So I'm done needing the answers

I've got a new way to wind you up

Carefully, Richie slowed the song down, quietening his guitar playing so that Eddie could hear every nuance in his voice, every vowel and consonant in every syllable.

As long as I've got you

That's enough.

He played out the last few bars of instrumental, ending on a perfect cadence. The last of the notes dissipated into the ether, and silence fell like a spotlight over them both. Richie stood and rested his guitar against the wall, then turned to Eddie. 'Well, what do you think?'

Eddie nodded slowly, 'It's a good song, Rich. It is.'

Richie rubbed his lips together. 'That's not what I mean, Eddie.'

With a sigh, Eddie said quietly, 'It's not enough.'

'What?' Richie asked feebly, unsure if he wanted to hear an answer.

'It's not enough for you. This. I wish it was, and I know you want to believe that it is, and you're trying to tell me that it is, and convince yourself that it is, but it's not, Richie.' He inhaled raggedly. 'I can see it, more and more, when we're together. I see how much this is killing you, almost having me. I see you dropping hints that I just won't pick up on. How often you're thinking and wondering and driving yourself crazy with the not knowing. I can see how fucking scared you are.'

Richie went to him, squatting down, reaching for each of his hands to hold, looking up at him. 'It's enough, Eds. It's enough.'

Eddie shook his head and started to sniff as he fought back the tears. 'I've been doing a lot of thinking, and I think that maybe we should –'

'No,' Richie squeezed his hands, his face crumpling. 'No, Eddie, don't do this. Don't say it. Please. Please, don't.'

Straining, almost gargling on the pain in his chest, Eddie spluttered, 'I can't keep doing this to you. It's not fair of me. Since we talked last week, all I can keep thinking is how I need to get you out of this. I need to get you away from me. I'm a complete mess, Rich. I barely even know who I am, let alone what I want.'

'I know who you are,' Richie tried. 'I know you,' he leaned up and pressed their lips together.

Staring at him with tragic affection, Eddie struggled, 'I'm not ready for all this. That's what I've realised. I'm not ready for any of it. It's too much and I can't pretend that I'm handling it all that well. And I want to give you an out.'

'I don't want it,' Richie insisted, brushing their noses together. 'I want you. I want this. Us.'

Eddie blubbered, 'Why?'

'I love you,' Richie said. 'I don't have a new way to say it.'

'But *why*? Why do you love me?' Eddie shrugged, standing up. 'Why do you want this? You could have everything with someone else and you're stood here settling for me, lowering all your fucking expectations and denying yourself someone who can be with you and love you in all the fucking ways you deserve, in all the fucking ways I can't.'

Richie narrowed his eyes as he stood. 'Hold up a second. What the fuck are you talking about?'

Eddie croaked, 'You like girls, Richie.'

'You said that didn't matter.'

'I didn't think it did,' Eddie said, 'but then I started thinking about what it meant. And I realised that if you found a way to fall out of love with me, if you could let me go, then you might meet someone who can give you fucking normal.'

'Why the fuck would I want normal?'

Eddie smiled sadly at him. 'You could have a proper girlfriend who loves you and who you introduce to your friends, who meets your parents, who you can take out and show off and kiss and hug. You wouldn't need to hide. You wouldn't need to pretend and lie. You wouldn't need to be fucking afraid.'

'I've got used to it,' Richie tried to joke. 'Eddie, you're worth it. You're so worth it to me.'

'You have to make so many sacrifices, Rich. You've already sacrificed so fucking much for me and I don't want to make you keep martyring yourself.'

Richie blurted, 'You're martyring yourself! You're literally doing that right now.'

'If I was, then it's about fucking time that I did something for you for a change,' Eddie sighed. 'That I gave you a chance to be fucking free after six years pining after me. I want that for you. I can give you that shot, and I feel like I should. I feel like I owe that to you after all you've fucking done for me. You could be happy if I stopped fucking you around and let you find it.'

'I'm happy now,' Richie said. 'I've already found it. You make me so fucking happy, Eds. These past four months: it's the happiest I've ever fucking been.'

Eddie frowned, 'Richie, that's fucking worrying. We cry constantly. I say the wrong things and I hurt you. I say the truth and it hurts you. I say nothing and that still hurts you. How can I hurt you that much and you actually call yourself happy?'

'It's not about what you say, Eds,' Richie rebuffed. 'It's the way you fucking look at me. Like you finally fucking see me. All of me. I see it. I see it right fucking now and every time I do, I'm just so happy.'

'I do see you,' Eddie promised, 'but –'

Richie cut him off. 'Eddie, I'm not just going to stop loving you.'

'You might have to,' Eddie choked.

Struck, shocked, violated, Richie wrapped his arms around himself and squeezed, as though he was trying to hold himself together, stop his heart from tearing out of his chest to sit, convulsing, in Eddie's hands. 'Oh God. Eddie, please don't do this to me. I don't want anyone else. Fuck, I would rather be fucking miserable with you than happy with someone else.'

Stammering, Eddie said, 'That's not good, Rich. That's not good. You shouldn't accept that. You shouldn't accept anything fucking less than what I know you give.'

Richie kissed him, hard and hating. The tears began to topple over each of their cheeks, streams down each of their faces, Eddie's blotted by Richie's hands.

'I love you so much,' Richie said softly.

Eddie nodded, sobbing, 'Maybe too much.'

Involuntarily, Richie clucked as he tried to breathe through his sudden onslaught of tears. 'Do you really want this to end?'

'No,' Eddie shook his head, 'but –'

'Then let's stay together,' Richie gushed.

Eddie smacked his lips, 'This is exactly the fucking problem, Richie. We don't even know if we *are* together, and I'm definitely not ready to *be* together. We're in completely different places. I've been trying so fucking hard to catch you up, but six years is too long a fucking time.'

Richie gulped, 'I know it is, but –'

Eddie went on, 'You've had years of working through the way you feel about me. And for you, it started because you realised that you love me, and eventually you kissed me. For me, it started with that kiss, and I'm still trying to figure out if I could love you. It's all fucking backwards and I have so much fucking work to do, and I'm fucking tired, and I hate watching myself fuck with your feelings like I don't care about them.'

'I can't lose you,' Richie wept, locking his hand around Eddie's neck, pulling him closer.

Eddie broke, falling into the kiss, his hands finding Richie's waist, squeezing at the cotton of his shirt. 'I don't want to lose you either.'

Richie spluttered, 'Then don't.'

'We can't do this anymore, Richie,' Eddie said brutally. 'It's going to kill us. Both of us. We need opposite things. I need time, and until I have it, I'm just fucking stealing yours.'

'Take it,' Richie offered. 'Take all my fucking time. I don't care.'

Eddie's heart wrenched. 'Stop doing this to yourself. Stop acting like I'm doing you a favour by being with you. Stop resigning yourself to me fucking hurting you. That's not how this is supposed to work.'

'At least,' Richie sniffed, panicked, desperate, clutching at his last, fragmented hope. 'At least tell me we're still going to be friends.'

'I've never just been a friend to you, Richie. Do you really want to be my friend? Do you even know how to just be my friend?'

'I do.' He kissed him again. 'I do.'

'Richie, you're in love with me.'

Richie rested their foreheads together, 'I know, but I said –'

'Richie,' Eddie said painfully, and let him go.

Desperate and dejected and terrified, Richie reminded, 'I promised. I fucking promised. I said you wouldn't lose me, even if you changed your mind, even if it was nothing, even if you broke my heart. I said as long as you want me around, I'd be there.'

Eddie burst into tears and threw his arms around him. 'For fuck's sake, Richie. I wouldn't blame you if you broke that promise. It'd be so fucking hard for you. For both of us.'

'We're friends first, Eddie,' Richie sniffled. 'We've always been friends

first.'

Eddie tried to speak, but when the words didn't come, he closed his mouth entirely, flattening his lips, his eyes flickering. His tinsel eyelashes were slicked silver. There was something so innocent, so preciously naïve in Richie's words, that Eddie felt like they were thirteen years old all over again.

'Eddie?' His heart pounded. They had to still be friends, couldn't not be friends. He had to still be in Eddie's life, in whatever capacity, in whatever way he could be, just to see his face and hear his laugh and *know* him.

There was a sick thudding moment where they both considered what it would really mean if they weren't friends anymore. If they didn't cycle to school together, didn't sit with each other at lunch, didn't chat at the lockers and go to the movies and play videogames. If they broke up the Losers club, forcing their other friends to choose sides and wonder whatever the hell went wrong between them.

They wondered how it might split. After Eddie, Bev was Richie's closest friend, but she was dating Bill, who was Eddie's. They were both equally close to Stan. Ben would go wherever Bev did. Mike would go wherever Bill did. It would be the end of an era, would change everything for everyone. It couldn't be like that. It would be too difficult, too complicated. There would be too many questions.

'Okay,' Eddie managed eventually.

'Okay?' Richie checked, coaxing Eddie's face back around.

Eddie scanned his face, wondering what he could ever do to deserve someone like Richie Tozier. He nodded. 'Yeah, okay. We can try.'

Richie was overcome by another raft of tears. 'Okay. Okay, fuck. Good.'

'I really thought,' Eddie whispered.

'What?'

'That you'd be mad at me,' he blubbered.

Richie gripped his forearms. 'I'm mad about a lot of fucking things,' he said honestly. 'I'm mad at this fucking town. I think I'll always be mad at that clown. I'm mad at your mom and mine. I'm even mad at Bill and Bev sometimes, because they don't know how fucking easy they have it. But I can't be mad at you for not being ready. Mad at the situation, maybe, but I'm not mad at you.'

Eddie sniffed, 'Then what are you?'

'I'm just sad, Eddie.' The corners of his mouth trembled, pulling downwards. 'I'm just really fucking sad.'

Eddie nodded, 'Me too.'

They cried together, letting it flood out of them shamelessly, ceaselessly, as they both settled into the sadness, the disappointment, the frustration and the disenchantment. It was several minutes before either of them had enough air in their lungs to speak again.

Morose, Richie asked, 'So what happens now?'

Puffing out his cheeks as he snivelled, trying to regulate his breathing, Eddie eventually calmed himself enough to say, 'When we leave this room –'

Squeezing his eyes shut, Richie's chest seized. 'That's it.'

Crestfallen, Eddie placed his hand on Richie's chest, right over his heart. 'I'm really sorry, Richie,' he said. 'I wish –'

'I know,' Richie said. He wedged his tongue between his back teeth and bit down until it hurt, if only to have some physical pain that was easier to process. 'I wish things were different too. And I wish you weren't such a stubborn *asshole* so I could change your mind.'

Eddie laughed even through his tears. 'Yeah, I am a stubborn asshole.' He glanced up at the clock on the wall. 'Five minutes until classes start.'

'Is that all?' Richie whispered.

'Yeah,' Eddie frowned. 'Not long enough, is it?'

Richie tried to smile, 'Ask your mom.'

Eddie hesitated, looking at the door, thinking that it would probably be better, be easier, if they left now. Gently, he asked, 'Do you want to stay here for the five minutes?'

Richie kissed him. Richie kissed him with every ounce of love that he had stored in his body, and all the love that generated and regenerated every second that he spent with Eddie Kaspbrak. Every time their lips parted even for a second so that Richie could snatch a breath, the sounds of his breaking heart eked out of him.

He wrapped his arms around him so tightly, trying to remember everything, trying to remember where his arms slotted into the small of Eddie's back, trying to remember which side their faces instinctively tilted when they kissed, trying to remember the way that Eddie tasted, the little gasping sounds which escaped his mouth, how Eddie grabbed at him and pulled him so close that they might just lose their balance completely, toppling over.

Eddie kissed him back, with fury and tragedy and chaos and passion. He kissed him with all the wanting and longing which Richie stirred in him, with all the heart and care that he felt for his friend.

He wished that he'd figured himself out earlier, wished that he knew himself a little better, wished that he knew Richie a little better, so that maybe, just maybe, this wouldn't be a last kiss, just a beautiful one.

He even thought about whether he wished that he and Richie weren't such good friends, that Richie wasn't his favourite person on the green earth before this started, that Richie wasn't always, always special to him, always an exception to him, always the one who brought out the best in him, because maybe then he would be able to feel it easier now if something had changed between them, if he was falling in love.

Yet, he couldn't wish away all the years of friendship. He couldn't wish that Richie had always meant less to him, that he hadn't realised just how incredible a person he really was, how full of boundless energy, terrible jokes and reckless love. He couldn't wish

away a second of it.

The bell rang, and they jolted apart from one another, the moment cruelly severed.

‘Shit,’ Richie muttered, rubbing his eyes.

‘You ready?’ Eddie sighed.

‘No.’

Eddie smiled at him kindly, tenderly. ‘Come on, Trashmouth.’ He jerked his head towards the door, then slowly let his grip fall from Richie’s arms and started to walk.

‘Wait,’ Richie said, grabbing for his wrist and pulling him back around.

‘Yeah?’ Eddie said, and for a brief moment, he found himself thinking about the time he broke his wrist in the Neibolt house, the cast he had worn, and the two words written there, overlapping in black and red ink.

Richie studied him, knowing that soon he would have to try not to look at Eddie so obviously in this way, without walls or guards, and he hoped that Eddie could see it, all of it, in his eyes, just as he could see the look in Eddie’s that he prayed wouldn’t disappear. He whispered, ‘Would you take it all back if you could?’

‘Fuck no,’ Eddie said emphatically, surprising even himself. He steadied himself and said carefully, ‘I wish I could have got here without hurting you but fuck, Richie,’ he sighed, ‘I’m so fucking grateful. I couldn’t take it all back. Not for anything.’

When Richie inhaled then, deep and full, he felt like the air was cleaner.

Eddie almost smiled at him, then started for the door. Richie followed, blindly. As they stepped over the threshold into the corridor, Eddie pointed behind Richie, back into the room.

‘Shit,’ Richie darted back in. ‘Almost forgot my guitar.’